MINUTES OF THE ANNUAL TOWN MEETING

MARCH 4, 2002

The legal voters of the Town of Ripton met at the Community House in Ripton on Monday, March 4, 2002, at 9:00 p.m. (following the Annual School Meeting, which began at 7:45 p.m.) to act upon articles one through eleven of the 2002 Warning. There were about 90 people in attendance.

Prior to the Town Meeting, two of Ripton's elected State officials briefly addressed the meeting: Ward Mann, State Representative, and Gerry Gossens, State Senator.

Mr. Mann reviewed the status of State education and transportation funding. He also discussed the State's methodology for income tax collection: he had supported Vermont's continuing to piggyback Federal income tax rather than having a distinct tax schedule but this proposal lost. Jean Todd inquired about Ripton's inclusion in proposed redistricting plans; she felt a danger the town would be shortchanged if lumped with towns across the mountains with whom there is little in common. Mr. Mann said that he personally would have preferred the district to have remained as it was, though he mentioned some aspects he thought beneficial—in general Mr. Mann approached the redistricting as a fait accompli. Nancy Breiden asked how the State would address the shortfall in State taxes. Mr. Mann discussed an amendment that would raise the income tax rate, but that didn't seem to entirely eliminate a shortfall. He said that there would be more information coming out in the papers soon.

Gerry Gossens reported that this is his second year serving on the Senate's Agriculture, Natural Resources & Energy, and Appropriations Committees. He reported that the State has a terrible budget problem. Governor Dean's new budget is proposing level funding the block grant to schools: "not a soul" on the Appropriations Committee supports this, and the Committee feels an obligation to fully fund student block grants. As to transportation, towns will be getting less than they expected from the State. Mr. Gossens reported that an ad hoc Senate committee was considering the redistricting issue. People in Lincoln, Warren, Monkton and Starksboro have expressed unhappiness with redistricting plans, but nothing much has been heard from Ripton. He stressed that this was the appropriate time to air public sentiment, and announced there would be a hearing on March 15th on interactive television at Hannaford Career Center. The Senate is concerned to hear all sides and bring fairness to the redistricting issue.

Article 1: Will the Town vote the sum of $244,009.90 to pay General Fund and Road expenses for the ensuing year, and pay outstanding orders or obligations of the Town…?

The motion to discuss was moved and adopted. Rather than review the budget, Bill Ford, Chair of the Selectmen, asked for questions from the Meeting.

Barry King asked about the status of Sparks Pit. Ron Wimett explained that the pit was closed and that we had been getting gravel from East Middlebury for about two years.

Bill Ford stated that the Town will be finalizing the sale of its land to the National Forest for about $60,000. The Selectmen will come back to the voters before spending any of these revenues. It was clarified that the land in question is on both sides of the Lincoln Road.

Willem Jewett asked if there had been any discussion with the Sheriff's Department in light of the string of recent burglaries. Laurie Cox, Selectman, stated that we have made requests in the past

as to how the Sheriff's Department should spend their time when working for the Town. Perhaps we need to reiterate our needs to them. Bill Ford stated that the Selectmen have redirected the Sheriff Department's patrolling patterns from time to time, directing attention, for example, to the Ripton School. They have been spending 32 hours per month in blocks of 4 hours, with the understanding that they do drive and travel our roads as well as park and monitor traffic speed. There is no particular pattern to their hours/locations of patrol, and this is probably a good thing. Mr. Ford asked Mr. Jewett if he had a specific proposal; he did not but noted the problems in his end of town (and that both recent perpetrators had been caught).

Ed Sullivan asked if we could get the Sheriff's Department to help in organizing a community watch program, noting that he agreed there seem to have been a lot of burglaries for such a small community. He added that as regards the Roads Budget, he appreciated the good quality of Ripton's roads and their maintenance. Ron Wimett, Roads Commissioner, got a round of applause.

Tim Hanson noted that the Sheriff's Department bills us for 300-500 miles of travel per month, illustrating that the patrol does more than sit and wait to issue speeding tickets.

Ron Wimett mentioned that the National Forest Service also drives the back roads and has authority to issue tickets and arrest wrongdoers.

Ann Barker expressed support for Ed Sullivan's suggestion of forming a community watch program. Ed Sullivan agreed to act as liaison with the Sheriff's Department and Bill Ford said the Selectmen would contact the Sheriff accordingly.

Article 1 was voted in the affirmative by voice vote.

Article 2: Will the Town vote the sum of $17,500 to Ripton Fire and Rescue to help pay Fire Department and First Response expenses for the year?

Tim Hanson, Fire Chief, reported that the budget is level-funded for 2002. The Department received grants last year that have helped pay for some equipment – the Lions helped to buy a suction machine and Neat Repeats bought a pulse oximeter. The Department will shortly receive two new sets of turnout gear, paid for in part from a grant Senator Jeffords pushed through Congress, and new air packs thanks to a grant from the State of Vermont. It is hoped the College will do some work on the fire trucks this year.

Chief Hanson reported that the Department had lost some good people over the last year, and has not been able to replace them yet. The Department is always looking for volunteers to join its medical and/or firefighting divisions, but now is in particularly serious need of help. He stated it is fair to say that volunteering is a lot of work, particularly in the beginning, with the training courses that new responders and firefighters need to take.

Article 2 was voted in the affirmative by voice vote.

Article 3: Will the Town vote the additional sum of $3,000 to the Ripton Fire and Rescue to pay to develop preliminary drawings and estimates for a future Fire Department and First Response building project?

Chief Tim Hanson gave a brief history of the current, substandard, building. There is no plumbing, no bathroom, no place to wash up after a fire, no meeting space, no ventilation, etc.,

etc. They were considering an addition, but the present site will not perk and therefore a sewer permit is not possible. Consideration was also given to hooking up to the commercial system on the other side of the road if the Department could obtain a permit, the owner's permission, permission to cut over several properties, a road-cut permit, and could include a pump in the design. At this point the flooding which occurred filled the station with mud—had the flooding been a little worse the building and equipment could have been destroyed.

The Department then became aware that FEMA would provide about $97,000 towards replacing the building. Conditions have been met, with one exception being that the Town must have an "All Hazards Mitigation Plan" in place. This is being drafted by Regional Planning, who hired a firm to do the work just last week. Once this plan is in place the FEMA money will be available. The Fire Department applied for another grant from Regional Planning and received a promise of an additional $50,000. This means the Department has been promised a total of nearly $150,000.

In conversations with contractors, the Department has been told that a safe (somewhat high) estimate for a building—such as we need is $100 per square foot. The Department believes it needs 50% more space than it currently has, or a 2,800 square foot building. At the $100/square foot estimate, such a building would cost about $280,000, or about $130,000 over what would be forthcoming from FEMA and Regional Planning. The building would include four bays, a meeting room, bathroom facilities including a shower, and storage for medical supplies.

The purpose of the $3,000 in the Warning is to pay for a designer and an estimator to work with the Department to do preliminary design work in order to flesh out plans. The Department needs to know what codes and standards must be met, and how much these would cost. The $3,000 would not allow for full architectural drawings (which would of course cost a lot more), but just enough to allow for more accurate cost figures.

The step after such preliminary design work, if the money pledged is in fact available, would be to hold public hearings in Town to discuss options.

Robert Geissler asked whether the Town had considered a fire association whereby each household would pay in a certain amount of money. Chief Hanson replied that it had not received strong consideration, as with 250-300 households $100-$150 would be needed from each. There is also the question of providing coverage to all residents.

Justin Willis asked if a new building would occupy the same site. Chief Hanson replied that one condition of grant monies would be that the current building must go. The site doesn't make sense, as the soil doesn't perk and it is located in a flood plain. There has been some informal and preliminary discussion with the Ripton School Board regarding building on their land, conceivably down by the Dugway.

Alice Clark asked if there was anyone at the State level who could guide us through the project, especially bearing in mind the problems recently experienced with school design and construction. Chief Hanson replied that the first step would be to have a local committee look at what's been built elsewhere, after which one could talk with the State. Plans are very exploratory at this juncture. Tim Price is looking into the idea of a steel-framed Butler Building.

Michael Seligmann asked if there were any grants available for the research phase of such a project. Mr. Hanson did not know but indicated he would check into it.

Brad Braun expressed his opinion that we need a new building but we don't really need gorgeous aesthetics. He asked for a sense of the Meeting as regards fanciness versus function. He would like to see a basic steel building – is this acceptable? Ed Sullivan commented that we shouldn't have a dump but that he saw no need for huge emphasis on aesthetics. He thought any new building would probably be as good or better than what we have now.

Michael Seligmann asked if voting to spend the $3,000 would keep us from attempting to get a planning/research grant. Mr. Hanson stated that we would pursue grants irregardless and that the Town's practice is to *not* expend voted funds if we can instead get grant monies.

Mr. Hanson noted that while it might not make a huge difference, a good building may assist in attracting and keeping volunteers.

Article 3 was voted in the affirmative by voice vote.

Article 4: Will the Town authorize the Selectmen to add $5,000 to the reappraisal fund created in 2001? Further, if the Listers begin the process of reappraisal, the total of these funds would become available for Listers' use, with the approval of the Selectmen.

Alison Joseph, Assistant Clerk and Lister, stated that it is desirable to keep building up this fund, and it is expected that we do with the $1 per parcel annual State payment. It has been eleven years since the last reappraisal. We don't *have* to conduct a reappraisal this year, but one is needed. Our level of appraisal dropped by 5% this year. That drop in level of appraisal translates to an anticipated 13 cent increase in the tax rate. It is expected that our level of appraisal will drop again this year, bringing us closer to the 80% cutoff requiring reappraisal. The Town's coefficient of dispersion, a measure of equity, is now at 17 percent. At 20 percent, reappraisal is mandatory. The Listers will need a new computer and software for reappraisal and would like to use money from this fund for it.

Willem Jewett asked if the Town Listers or an outside firm would do the work. Ms. Joseph felt that Ripton's Listers could do the appraisal themselves for $20,000 versus $40,000 paid to an outside firm. She added that it is hard to hire firms these days because many towns have been required to reappraise and the appraisal firms have a backlog of work.

Willem Jewett asked if the reappraisal could be spread out over a number of years; Ms. Joseph explained that such an approach, although sometimes necessary, is not desirable.

Ed Sullivan asked about costs. Ms. Joseph responded that a new computer for the Listers would cost about $1,000 and the attendant software $4,000. The current computer is over ten years old.

Willem Jewett asked if we had held discussions with towns who had done reappraisals themselves. Ms. Joseph replied that we have. Most have been small towns who found it manageable. She noted that we are still finding mistakes from the last appraisal. Tim Hanson added that the 1991 reappraisal was something of a nightmare and not a professional job. The weight of public response to reappraisal still falls, of course, on the Town Clerk's Office. As regards the computers, we are already doing listing work ourselves with success.

It was asked if it were possible to update appraisals each year. Ms. Joseph explained that reappraisal is not cost effective or feasible each year, but that sometimes certain categories are addressed

Article 4 was voted in the affirmative on a voice vote.

Article 5: Will the Town have current property and personal taxes collected by the Treasurer, with a tax due date of November 4, 2002?

As this is a "housekeeping" article, there was no discussion.

Article 5 was voted in the affirmative on a voice vote.

Article 6: Will the Town vote to eliminate the position of Town Auditor, and to have the finances of the Town audited professionally on an annual basis, and the Town Report prepared by the Town Clerk and Town Treasurer?

Bill Ford observed that the Meeting should note that Ripton received an Award of Outstanding Achievement for its 2000 Town Report, the highest recognition awarded by the State. He recognized this achievement of Tim Hanson and his staff, who were applauded by the Meeting.

He felt this article should be approved because Tim and his staff do a good job, and because it is now simple and inexpensive to have the books professionally audited. The change would constitute a cost shift rather than a cost increase.

Article 6 was voted in the affirmative on a voice vote.

Article 7: Will the Town vote to reduce the property taxes on the Silver Towers Camp, owned and operated by Vermont Elks Charities, to 33% of the total taxes that would be due?

Laurie Cox explained that there has historically been an agreement to reduce the Elks' taxes, an agreement which expired a year ago. That agreement had the Elks paying 25% of their full tax bill; this agreement would raise the amount to 33%. Ms. Cox stated that the Elks must use the property as a camp in order to receive the reduced tax bill.

In response to Cathy Braun, Tim Hanson explained the composition of the Board of Civil Authority.

Willem Jewett asked if the tuition agreement was part of the historical agreement and Ms. Cox responded that it was.

Malcolm Billings understood that the Elks were doing a good thing, but asked how much property they have and what is its worth. Mr. Hanson responded that their 25 acres are valued at $250,000.

Joyce Henderson asked about use of the facility for the annual motorcycle rally and how this use affected the situation. Sue Collitt stated the motorcycle rally brings a lot of money to Vermont. Tim Hanson reported that the motorcycle rally occurs on the one weekend and income to the Elks is minimal. Ms. Henderson asked if the agreement was null and void if the Elks elected to hold more events not in keeping with the spirit of the agreement and Ms. Cox responded in the affirmative.

Dick Collitt asked how the Elks felt about the increase. Ms. Cox replied that of course they would prefer a lower tax bill. Dick asked if they were sent a full tax bill last year. Ms. Cox

responded that they were, at which point they came to the BCA who reduced their bill to 33%. The Selectboard then decided to come to the voters with this article.

Joyce Henderson asked if the Elks informed the Town prior to use of the site for the motorcycle rally. She also asked if the College informed us when they held income-producing events such as weddings at Breadloaf. Dick Collitt said the College doesn't charge; Ed Sullivan said they charge for catering. Bill Ford said we should stick to the Elks.

Article 7 was passed in the affirmative on a voice vote.

Article 8: Will the Town vote to create a Conservation Commission agreeable to the provisions of 24 V.S.A. 4501?

Warren King reviewed and summarized the work of a Conservation Commission. In 1977 the State passed enabling legislation and there are now 80 such commissions. Their purpose is to promote community responsibility for natural resources. Commissions are advisory bodies with limited powers; they provide advice. For example, in 2003 the Planning Commission will be revising the Town Plan and a Conservation Commission could contribute to the process. Mr. King said that a Conservation Commission could also inventory and study our natural resources, receive gifts, and promote educational activities.

Mr. King explained that a commission would consist of three to nine members appointed by the Selectmen to serve 10-year terms. Most commissions operate with no budget, although they may receive funds. George Phinney asked if there were criteria for the level of expertise required of commission members. Mr. King responded that anyone with time and interest would be welcome; expertise would be nice but it isn't essential.

Article 8 was voted in the affirmative on a voice vote.

Article 9: Shall the residents of Ripton support the following resolution to protect our farms, food, and the environment:

Citizens throughout the United States are taking steps to address the problem of genetically engineered (GE) foods at the state and local levels, in response to the failure of Congress and federal regulatory agencies to adequately address the issue.

The residents of Ripton call upon our Legislators and Congressional representatives to support the mandatory labeling of all genetically engineered foods and seeds, as well as a moratorium on the further growing of GE crops until there is credible and scientific evidence that these products are no longer harmful to our health, the environment, and the survival of family farms.

Ian Pounds presented his negative views about genetically engineered foods. He commented that:

- There is a lack of FDA scrutiny.
- The Bush Administration has an interest in promoting GE foods.
- "Super bugs" and "super weeds" will result.
- Monsanto is forcing people to buy their seeds.
- Pollen drift is a problem for organic farms.
- Pesticide residue remains in soil for 8 months.

- Long-term effects of GE food consumption are unknown.
- GE foods are a problem for those with allergies.
- Technology does not equal progress.
- GE foods are antibiotic-resistant.
- GE foods are expensive and problematic for farmers.
- Adverse economic effects are evidenced by trade strictures and European and Japanese banning of GE foods.

Jim Kater commented that he understood the point of the resolution but thought there was confusion between viruses and germs.

Lou Burridge asked if the Farm Bureau is supporting the resolution. Mr. Pounds did not know.

George Phinney stated that he was not adequately informed to have an opinion on the resolution but that in any event our Town Meeting was an inappropriate forum for its consideration. Malcolm Billings said he thought we could vote on whatever we liked and gave his support to the resolution. Mr. Pounds felt the resolution would send a message to senior FDA officials about large corporations such as Monsanto.

Mr. Phinney said he could not support the resolution without hearing the other side of the issue.

Joyce Dicianna asked what outcome our passing of the resolution would have. Clerk Hanson explained it would simply go on the record. He explained the resolution was not drafted or endorsed by the Selectmen.

Frank Wolf commented that the resolution's last sentence presumes GE foods are harmful, that the language is weighted and the resolution should be tabled. He mentioned that the United Nations has wholeheartedly adopted GE foods as beneficial.

Lauren Slater felt the resolution is appropriate to a Town Meeting forum because of the urgency of the situation. She felt the resolution needed to be passed quickly and supported by groups of people such as towns. She felt there was a danger that there would soon be no alternative to GE food. She stated we could move to correct the biased wording of the resolution's last sentence.

Freeman Allen suggested we strike the phrase "no longer" and replace it with "not." The amendment was moved, seconded, and unanimously voted in the affirmative.

Article 9 was voted, albeit not unanimously, in the affirmative by voice vote.

Article 10: The voters of Ripton hereby endorse the Earth Charter. We recommend that the Town of Ripton, the State of Vermont, the United States of America and the United Nations use the Earth Charter to guide decision-making on issues of local, state, national and international importance.

Sally Mack spoke briefly to the issue and referred the Meeting to the brochure previously handed out. She mentioned the involvement of Steven Rockefeller in Middlebury, and stated that it was important to disseminate the Earth Charter to garner support and discussion on a global level.

Article 10 was voted in the affirmative on a voice vote.

Article 11: Any other business proper to come before this meeting.

Sally Mack spoke in support of the Open Door Clinic. She reported 45 visits by Ripton residents last year and noted 80% of patients are employed but have no health insurance.

Robert Geissler questioned the Earth Charter's endorsement of non-violence and passivism in the face of September's terrorism, the war in Afghanistan, etc. He was informed that the Meeting had already voted to endorse the Earth Charter.

There being no other business the meeting was adjourned at 10:15 p.m.

William Ford
Selectmen

Ronald Wimett

Laureen Cox

Timothy Hanson, Town Clerk

Alison Joseph, Assistant Town Clerk