



Town of Bennington

Communications Coordinator Report — November 28, 2022

Preparing for Winter

Town staff is busy wrapping up all the projects from the summer and getting things ready for the frozen months ahead. The overnight Parking Ban began on November 15 and will continue until March 31, 2023.

Elections

I work with the Town Clerk to help get the word out about elections in our town and to provide information on sample ballots, and where to find what district you are in. We also strive to build trust in our electoral system by sharing links to information about election integrity and by encouraging everyone to participate and vote. Our town clerk is the keeper of all things election-related! You can learn more at: <https://benningtonvt.org/departments/town-clerk/elections/>

Willow Park Playgrounds:

Work on the new playgrounds was interrupted in late September when a number of issues were identified by the playground engineer and playground certification team. The most visible issue was problems with the curbing, but they also included placement of Geotextile material installation, and a punch list of items regarding the new equipment.

Crews have completed putting in the new curbing in mid November. By the time this report is submitted, Town staff will have met on November 22 to discuss final plans for addressing the remaining issues. Because this includes the sub-base and the final poured rubber surfacing, we don't expect to be completed until the spring of 2023 due to winter weather.

The \$500,000 cost of the new playgrounds have been entirely funded through ARPA monies. The Town is committed to ensuring that the project is completed as quickly as possible but in accordance to all specifications and requirements. We greatly appreciate the patience of the community as we work towards finishing this important community resource.

Citizen Outreach:

I met with citizens ten times over the last month on a variety of issues, ideas, and concerns. There was one public record requests to my office. I note that all of the public record requests made in the last couple of months are from people that have names that appear to be made-up and use free email addresses.

Community Outreach

In addition to the series of posts and reminders about the elections, we have also done a series of posts reminding folks about things like taxes, deadlines, and how to pay. Nobody likes taxes, but it's even worse to have to pay penalties, so we hope this was useful.

The proposed move of the senior center to a new location at the BennHi is a key part of the redevelopment of that property. I have been working with Shannon to meet with seniors at the Senior Center on a regular basis to gather input, hear concerns, and to answer questions. We held another meeting this past month, staying two and a half hours to ensure time for everyone to have their questions answered fully. Concerns remain about the move, particularly around parking and safety. These meetings have been very useful in keeping seniors fully informed and giving the planners at the town valuable feedback.

250th Anniversary Planning:

A full meeting of the Bennington 250th committee was held in October and a number of task forces that were created have started meeting as well. A press release about the 250th committee has been sent to the Banner and an interview with a Banner reporter is scheduled tomorrow so a story about the work so far should be out in the Banner by the time you read this report. An informational website to keep everyone informed about the work of the committee is also planned and should launch in January of 2023.

I also participated in a meeting of the VT 250th Commission to finish work on strategic planning for the commission moving forward.

Village Cemetery Vandalism

On October 24, the community was shocked to discover extensive vandalism at the Village Cemetery. Founded in 1813, the cemetery has about 2,100 graves and around 200 stones had been overturned, and many broken. This included the gravestones of veterans from perhaps every war since the Revolution. The sadness and disgust at the senseless vandalism resonated both locally, and beyond.

In just hours after the news broke, we began to hear from people asking how they could help. A volunteer day was organized to re-set as many unbroken stones as possible, and the result was very impressive. Dozens of people showed up, including teams from towns like Shaftsbury, Pownal, Manchester, Halifax, Clarendon, Rutland, Hoosick Falls, Cohoes, members of the VT Old Cemeteries Association and more. Our local VFW deserves special praise for both the number of volunteers they brought out, as well as providing food for everyone.

With all the help... every stone that had been cast down was re-set, and many broken stones were fixed as well. An additional work day is planned for May 27, 2023 to finish work fixing broken stones with the

help of the VT Old Cemeteries Association, whose help and expertise are a huge asset.

What started as a tragic event, at least had a happier ending. We are very thankful to everyone who came out to help with the cemetery restoration! If you would like to assist with fixing stones next May, you can contact me at jspivak@benningtonvt.org

Website Development

Work is almost completed finishing the move of documents from the old website to the new unified website that has been in development for almost a year now. The new website combines the current town website as well as the Planning and Permits website and the Bennington Police Department website. A team of volunteer "beta testers" will be starting work the week after Thanksgiving to help with testing the new navigation and user friendliness of the website.

Once this testing is completed, we will be ready to switch to the new website! The partner the town has been working with on the new site is REVIZE, which specializes in municipal websites. Their client list includes over 1,600 towns including many in Vermont such as South Burlington and St. Albans.

Facebook POST OF THE MONTH:

The vandalism at Village Cemetery got a tremendous amount of attention with over 30,000 reach on Facebook.

The Bennington Banner ran stories on both the vandalism as well as the restoration. We also did numerous interviews and had strong coverage from regional TV stations such as NBC Channel 13, ABC Channel 10, as well as Fox News.

We hope that the renewed interest in the cemetery will help us avoid similar vandalism in the future.

