



Town of Bennington

Communications Coordinator Report — December 19, 2022

Winter is Here!

The first real snow of the winter fell on December 12. We were perhaps fortunate that we had a mild start to the winter, but I'm sure all the ski areas are happy that we are back on track with the snowy weather. Remember that the overnight parking ban began on November 15 and will continue until March 31, 2023!

Midterms, Select Board, and School Boards

Our Town Clerk, Cassandra Barbeau, reports that "overall there was a small increase in voter participation over the last mid terms in 2018." Town Clerks play a key role in everything election related in VT.

Elections for the Select Board and School Boards are now on the horizon. Traditionally, candidates for these positions begin campaigning right after the holidays, but can start anytime in December. The deadline for all required paperwork and petitions is six weeks prior to Town Meeting. That makes the deadline to be on the ballot January 30, 2023.

To run for a seat on the Select Board or a School Board, you should start by visiting the Town Clerk. To be on the ballot you need to fill out a "Consent of Candidate" form and have a petition signed by 30 registered voters in the Town that is specific to the position you are seeking. The Town Clerk will guide you on how to properly fill out the form and petition to ensure there are no problems. The form is available by the secretary of state on the Vermont.gov website, but it is highly recommended that you pick it up at the Town Clerk's office so they can assist you and prevent errors that could jeopardize a candidacy.

Town meeting day is always the day before the first Tuesday in March when the town budget is voted on. This year, Town Meeting will be on Monday, March 6, 2023. The vote will occur on Tuesday March 7.

Bennington's Select Board is made up of seven members who serve a three year term. The terms are staggered so 2-3 seats are up for election each year. Bennington is unusual in this respect as most VT towns with Select Boards have just five members.

Willow Park Playgrounds:

We got lucky with the weather! We had assumed that the final top coat of the new rubberized surface for the playgrounds at Willow Park would have to wait until spring before it could be properly installed. Mother Nature had a different idea. Temperatures climbed just high enough the week of December 12 for Play By Design's rubber installation vendor to be able to put the final top coat on. This completes the biggest remaining step for the new playgrounds.

Paul Dansereau, Bennington's director of facilities, was on hand for the final top coat. "The vendor was able to move forward with the final top coat. It was a close call getting it done so late in the year. We got lucky with the weather and the company will stand behind the full warranty on their work."

The project is still not 100% done. Several items will have to wait until spring before they can be completed. Those include: a final section of curbing that needs to be installed by the exercise area adjacent to the playground, final cleanup and successful seeding of new grass, additional mulching, a few other checklist items, and a final inspection and certification.

We are all disappointed that the playgrounds were not completed in time for kids to use it in 2022, but we would rather get it done right than getting it done wrong in a hurry.

We are grateful to our team members such as Mark Sawyer and RJ Joly for sharing concerns that ensured that the Town got the full value of the work we contracted for. A ribbon cutting celebration for the new playgrounds will be held in the spring of 2023 to announce the official re-opening.

Citizen Outreach:

Because of the shorter time between meetings this holiday season, I'm reporting on just two weeks. I met with citizens seven times over this time on a variety of issues, ideas, and concerns. There were three public record requests to my office.

Community Outreach

In addition to outreach about the elections, we also had some seasonal reminders about the Parking Ban, and updates around the work at Willow Park.

250th Anniversary Planning:

Work on 250th planning was a big part of the last two weeks. There was a meeting for the Bennington 250th steering committee as well as for the fundraising task force and educational task forces. Planning for the next full committee meeting that will take place in January has also begun. A nice story about the planning effort was published in the Bennington Banner on November 29.

I also was part of the Vermont 250th Commission’s education committee team that was a presenter at the Vermont Alliance of Social Studies conference in Montpelier on December 7. The conference was the first since the pandemic and was well attended with over 150 people. The goal was to increase awareness of the 250th to educators and to solicit their feedback on how we can assist them at the state level to include 250th related themes in their classroom curriculums.

Website Development

The new website combining the current town website as well as the Planning and Permits website and the Bennington Police Department website is nearing completion.

I have begun working with volunteer “beta testers” to help with testing the new navigation and user friendliness of the website. Each testing session discovers new things to be added, fixed, or improved which is exactly the purpose of this testing. Testing will continue this week and next, and will finish with a “soft launch” to the select board and Town Department managers probably right after the holidays.

Once this testing is completed, we will be ready to switch to the new website! At this point, it looks like the total cost of the new website will be around \$12,500... about half the cost we had budgeted for.

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:

One of my very first posts as communications coordinator was a picture of the vegetation being removed from the future Rail Trail pathway and it did really well in terms of reach, over 6,000 which was an eye opener for me at the time.

Deja vu... this recent post for the “soft” opening of the Rail Trail did similarly well in terms of reach with an impressive 6,950 reach. Posts of this sort have consistently proven to be of great interest to the community. Our town seems to really like our trails!

