

ALL ABOUT TOWN

Stuart A. Hurd, Town Manager

I have been starting my column in pretty much the same way for the last two years. I will continue as long as the omicron variants threatened our normality. The State and Federal mask mandates have pretty much lapsed. Unfortunately, another omicron variant is making waves in Vermont and elsewhere. It is hitting everyone. Thankfully, those of us who are vaccinated and boosted don't get very sick in most cases. So, folks, let's be careful and stay safe and healthy.

The Select Board has now announced the openings on the various boards and commissions including the Community Policing Advisory Review Board (CPARB). Applications/letters of interest for all positions are now being accepted at my office until May 16th. The Select Board intends to interview those who apply for a position but have not served before. Incumbents will not be interviewed. The whole process should conclude in early June with appointments announced.

The playgrounds design at Willow Park have been selected, Canopy Discovery in orchid. Our consultants are finalizing the designs. If all goes well, the new playgrounds will be in place by August 2022. A presentation will be held at the upper pavilion, Willow Park, May 14 at 4 pm.

The repurposing of the former Benn High is being actively pursued. We are currently performing environmental due diligence including air testing for PCB's. The results so far are encouraging. Uses under consideration are a new, expanded Senior Center, an expanded Meals on Wheels kitchen and dining facility, offices to serve the senior population, and a new gymnasium space with adjoining space for community recreation programming. The remainder of the building is projected to be housing for seniors and others. Shires Housing has agreed to partner with the Town in this endeavor. We plan to update the community monthly at Select Board meetings and work with our senior population through direct meetings at the Senior Center.

You will recall the Select Board's support for State funding to bring Pathways Vermont to Bennington County. The Vermont House removed the funding from the budget, but a concerted effort by the Town, SVMC and others and the work of Senators Dick Sears and Brian Campion have resulted in the funds being placed back in the budget. Pathways Vermont is an extremely successful organization that helps the chronically homeless not only find housing, but also find and maintain a healthy lifestyle.

At its most recent meeting, the Select Board began a two-meeting hearing on the proposed changes to the Town's Land Use Regulations and Town Plan to assist with the redevelopment of the Everett Estate property, formerly SVC. The long-term goal is to repurpose the Everett Mansion and allow it to be put into productive use while maintaining its historic significance and to allow the gymnasium and the athletic fields to continue use as a community asset. The remainder of the site including the dormitories is undergoing a continuous planning effort by the owners in consultation with the Town.

With the arrival of Spring comes the planning for the next construction season. Rising prices and disruptions caused by the war in Ukraine are impacting our planned activities. Costs are soaring and do not appear to be coming back to earth. One begins to wonder if profit taking is part of the driving force behind this. Believe me, we'll do our level best to continue to improve our infrastructure, continue to remove lead service lines and keep our roads and sidewalks in good repair.

Remember, if anyone has any questions or suggestions arising from this column or on any town matters, please contact me at 802-442-1037 or stop in at the Town Offices on South Street.

Stuart Hurd is Bennington's Town Manager. He writes a monthly column on town issues.