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Accountant Accused of Embezzlement

by Emmett Avery

CRAFTSBURY — Rhonda Patenaude pled not guilty to a felony embezzlement charge at Orleans Superior Court November 12. Patenaude, 49, of Derby, stands accused of embezzling $12,017.69 from the Craftsbury General Store over three years, while contracted as a bookkeeper there.

According to an affidavit filed by the Vermont State Police (VSP), Patenaude allegedly carried out the embezzlement through a series of fraudulent checks. Arresting State Trooper Abigail Drew's affidavit alleges Patenaude concealed the true nature of the checks through a number of means, including changing her name to a vendor name, changing the amount of the checks, and using the same check number twice.

In an interview Monday, Emily Maclure, co-owner of the Craftsbury General Store, said that she realized something was wrong during a conversation with Fred's Energy about her account there. During the conversation with Fred's, Maclure mentioned Patenaude's name, and when she did, the Fred's Energy employee mentioned Patenaude had paid her personal energy bill with a Craftsbury General Store check. Maclure brought the alleged embezzlement to the attention of State Police on May 22, 2019. According to arrest records, Patenaude was arrested on the morning of October 25, 2019.

The maximum penalty for the charge, if convicted, is ten years in prison, a $10,000 fine, or both. Patenaude was released November 12 on conditions that she attends future court dates and does not visit the Craftsbury General Store or contact Maclure.

The day she spoke with Fred's, Maclure said she reached out to Patenaude directly, and Patenaude claimed that Maclure had given her permission to pay the Fred's bill with the General Store's check. Maclure says she gave no such permission. Maclure also noted that Patenaude did not have the authority to write checks from the Craftsbury General Store account. Over the next few days, Patenaude offered to pay back Maclure for money taken up to that point. Excerpts of Patenaude's communications to Maclure over the next few days, found in the affidavit, state, "I did confirm that you are correct, and I did do some double payments. You have my sincere deepest apologies for that. I can tell you from the deepest of my soul that this was not intentional and not at any time would I steal money from you or anyone else."

In a different communication, Patenaude offered to pay back $10,000 to $11,000, saying that she had closed out her 401k and was working to refinance her house. "I want to get this cleared up to get what you say I owe you as soon as possible," said Patenaude.

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photo by Emmett Avery

At approximately 2:15 p.m. Tuesday, Nov. 19, a fully-loaded log truck broke its driveshaft at the blinking light in downtown Hardwick, gumming up traffic on the main roadway for nearly half an hour. The driver reported that the driveshaft broke when he slammed on the brakes to avoid hitting a pickup truck that ran a stop sign.

Kehler Qualifies for Junior Olympic Nationals

by Jim Flint

KING'S PARK, N.Y. – Charlie Kehler made his mark Sunday at the USA Track and Field Region 1 Junior Olympic Cross Country Championships.

Running for the Green Mountain Athletic Association (GMAA) Juniors team, the Hazen Union Wildcat lined up with the top 11 to 12-year-old boys from across New England and New York State. The fastest 30 finishers in their age group qualify for the Junior Olympic National Championships.

Sunday's race was held at Sunken Meadow State Park. The 1,287-acre natural area lies along the north coast of Long Island along Long Island Sound. Kehler qualified for the event by placing ninth in the 11-12 boys age group at the New England Championships, held on Nov. 16 in Smithfield, Rhode Island.

Kehler was the sole GMAA entry in the Region 1 boys 11-12 age group. He and his mom, Victoria von Hessert, made the six and a half-hour drive to New York on Saturday. They arrived on Long Island in time to enjoy a sunny afternoon with temperatures in the 40s.

At the park, Kehler met up with Damian Bolduc, from Craftsbury. Bolduc and his wife Jessica coach the Green Mountain Athletic Association Juniors team. He and Kehler walked the three kilometers (1.86 miles) course together to develop a strategy for Sunday's race. Kehler was all ears, absorbing coaching tips specific to the course topography, anticipated weather conditions, and level of competition.

Fueled with an evening meal of pasta and Bolognese sauce, Kehler felt energized and ready to run in the morning. He arrived at the park at 9 a.m. to find a much different scene than Saturday's placid fall day.

"It was raining with big puddles everywhere and windy," said Kehler. "Temperatures were in the mid-30s but it was not as bad as the Vermont Middle School State Championships. The ground was firm."

Kehler was one of 122 boys in the 11-12 age group. The race started in a wide-open field which gradually funneled onto the course. After the first half-mile, the runners made a U-turn over a concrete bridge then doubled back. A long moderate-grade hill began just after the first kilometer and went through the one-mile mark. After cresting the hill, the course wound over a wooden bridge and back to the start/finish field. The last 500 meters of the race was straight and flat.

"I went out fast," said Kehler. "That was my plan – to sprint and then settle into pace. For the first half-mile to the bridge, we ran straight into the wind. My strategy was to stick with the pack and draft off other runners. When we made the U-turn, the wind was at our backs until the hill. I conserved energy at the bottom of the hill then accelerated over the crest."

As Kehler started to make his move, the rest of the field also sped up. Flying down the hill, the trail narrowed to one-person wide at the bottom then curved upward, like a bike berm. With a kilometer remaining in the race, Kehler felt a stitch in his side. Proactively he stood straighter and opened up his chest to relieve the cramp.

"I started focusing on the small of the backs of the runners ahead of me," said Kehler, who finished Cormac Leahy with the racing tip. "I passed one or two people. With 500 meters to the finish, everybody started moving fast."

The crowd cheered loudly as the young runners vied for position in an all-out sprint to the finish line. "I knew I had it in the final 40 meters," said Kehler.

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courtesy photo

Charlie Kehler splashes through a finish line puddle at the USATF Region 1 Junior Olympic Cross Country Championships, held Sunday on Long Island. Running in the boys 11-12 age group, Kehler placed 18th of 122 runners and qualified for next month's National Championships in Madison, Wisc.

Surprise Bill for Craftsbury Academy

by Emmett Avery

CRAFTSBURY – Ryan Bjerke, Building Manager at the Craftsbury Academy, received an unwelcome $200,000 surprise this past summer.

According to the information he received from the Hardwick Electric Department (HED), the school had been undercharged for their electricity use for roughly ten years. This resulted in an initial estimate that the school owed HED $200,000.

According to Bjerke, the Craftsbury Academy, which is a designated shelter for the town, does not currently have a backup electrical generator. Sometime during the summer, Bjerke contacted HED for information on what kind of generator would be appropriate for the school. While gathering research, HED noticed the schools electric meter was not reading correctly. Mike Sullivan, HED general manager, notified Bjerke that HED had been undercharging the academy and intended to recoup the back charges. According to Craftsbury School Board Chair Harry Miller, for the past few months HED has run a second meter next to the faulty one to determine the actual energy amounts used by the school.

Miller said the undercharge was the result of an improperly installed electric meter. In an interview Monday, Bjerke said it appeared the school had been undercharged by roughly half because the faulty meter was installed. Miller said the meter was installed around the same time that significant work was done at the Craftsbury campus to improve energy efficiency; a possible reason the meter issue was not immediately noticed.

Once the undercharge was established, Craftsbury took the issue to the Public Utility Commission (PUC). According to Miller, the PUC came back with a reduced amount owed to HED by the Academy. The number, according to the Orleans Southwest Supervisory Union's Chief Financial Officer, John Smith, is $139,019.75.

HED presented the Academy board with three possible payment options, including an offer to reduce the amount in return for faster repayment. In an interview Sunday night, Miller said the Craftsbury School Board is researching options to avoid

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Select Board Begins Budget Discussions

by Doug McClure

HARDWICK – The Hardwick Select Board began discussions Thursday on next year's budget. Business Manager Casey Rowell conducted a line-by-line spreadsheet review of revenue and budgets for the capital fund, highway department, town office and fire department. The police department budget was presented but, due to the absence of Chief Aaron Cochran, was not discussed in depth. All numbers were preliminary as part of a long process leading up to the Town Meeting.

Sand and salt is a major component of the highway department budget, and predicting needed amounts for each can be difficult. According to Road Foreman Tim Fadden, so far approximately ten loads of salt have been deployed. Board chair Eric Remick said "I think we could say [the budgeted amount] needs to go up, or we do a salt reduction." The price of salt is approximately $80 per ton. Last year the town used 1,200 tons and the price was roughly the same. Fielder said Remick suggested, and others agreed, to bump the salt budget from $85,000 to $90,000 for the preliminary budget.

A more frustrating item was the budget for crosswalks. An earlier idea had been to increase painting crosswalks from once to twice per year, but Remick said "I'm about burned out on trying new schemes, because it seems everything we've tried has failed." The most recent approach – rubberized crosswalks melted onto the pavement with torches – is already beginning to disintegrate after only a few months. Select board member Shari Cornish, who is on the newly-formed Traffic Safety Task Force which seeks to address pedestrian and traffic issues, said that while the task force is still working on recommendations, pedestrian signs that flash might be a more permanent solution. Morrisville has similar signs, which Cornish later clarified are different from Montpelier's signs, which also chirp. For the initial budget, $3,500 was added to the capital fund for a sign to evaluate its effectiveness.

Rowell said a major item in the office budget is a new phone system. The town cannot proceed with that immediately as it has a contract with Fairpoint that runs until mid-2020 and has high early termination fees. The new system for the town offices is budgeted to cost around $3,500 a year, versus $1,900 for the current system. Another increase in the town office budget is due to the upcoming

See DISCUSSIONS, 4

Yellow Barn News, and Parklets Re-Emerge

by Doug McClure

HARDWICK – At its Nov. 21 meeting, the select board received updates from Town Manager Shaun Fielder on several projects including the Bridgman Reservoir. Fielder spoke of the Yellow Barn's new tenants and other related developments. Hardwick Electric Department (HED) Commissioner Nat Smith provided a brief update, the topic of parklets was revisited and talks began on next year's town budget (see separate article).

Fielder characterized Cabot's agreement to participate in the Yellow Barn as "important and positive news" and said the creamery had "committed to taking the retail space of the full former Greensboro Garage's lower level." Select Board Chair Eric Remick said Cabot seems "really excited" about having a presence in the project and showcasing local products.

"We had a goal to create some sort of visitors' center where people could land in Hardwick, get their bearings and we hadn't really figured that out until Cabot," Remick said. "Now, people can stop on their way into town, see some local stuff."

Fielder agreed it was a "win-win" situation, and board member Elizabeth Dow agreed that the news was, "wonderful." Remick said the Yellow Barn venture was more than three years in the making and that "it feels like we're getting some traction, it's going to happen and we'll see it being beneficial to the town."

Fielder said the Vermont Economic Development Authority approved over $2 million in interim financing for the Yellow Barn while awaiting word on other funding requests. "We're at a point where we just have to wait and see what happens with these other funding requests," Fielder said. He added that at least one decision could come as early as Friday with another expected by mid-December.

In an update on the Bridgman Reservoir repairs, Fielder said "we're at watertight condition," and repairs to the floor system and clean out are next. The reservoir should be online imminently, Fielder said, adding that, due to the roof failure, the regular annual flushing done in spring had not been possible and residents may see cloudy water until next spring. He advised that residents confronted with cloudy water should "let [the water] run a bit."

HED Commissioner Smith said financial revenues for HED were

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photo by Vanessa Fournier

Mariel Hess (left) pours pureed butternut squash into pie shells as Bethany Dunbar (center) Center For an Agricultural Economy (CAE) Community Programs Manager brings in pie crusts and Sterling College chef Paul Sweeney (right) bakes the pies. The 11th Annual Pies for People drew many volunteers who prepared and baked 178 pies from donated goods. Pies will be donated to the Hardwick Area Food Pantry, Kwanis Dinner, schools and nursing homes. The event is sponsored by the CAE, Sterling College and the Hardwick Area Food Pantry.

photo by Vanessa Fournier

The town of Hardwick has utilized about 10 percent of its budgeted 1,000 tons of salt for the 2019-2020 year. November weather has already brought several icy road conditions.

Tons of Salt, But 'It Is What It Is'

by Emmett Avery

HARDWICK – Salt has become a key ingredient in New England winters over the past 80 years. New Hampshire is said to have pioneered its use, with the first extensive salting program in the country starting in the early 1940s. Since then, salt as a de-icing agent has only increased. According to data from the United States Geological Survey (USGS), roughly 21 million metric tons of salt are spread on the nation's roads each winter. There are other means of de-icing, but salt remains the most cost-effective and commonly-used agent in the U.S. According to the USGS, the U.S. produced 43 million tons of salt in 2017, and the salt industry is worth $1.9 billion.

The country's primary de-icing agent is sodium chloride, or "rock salt," and is used from curing meat to acting as a chemical base for products such as PVC pipe. It's also the stuff sitting in a shaker

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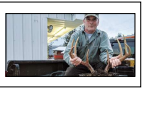
Area Deer Reports



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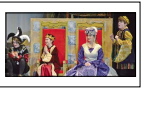
Craftsbury REACH Afterschool Crafts

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