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Greensboro Select Board Approves FY 2021 Budget

by Emmott Avery

GREENSBORO — The Greensboro Select Board discussed and approved the town's Fiscal Year 2021 budget at their January 8 meeting. There was also discussion and approval of several other items, including a plan to erect new signage to warn of a problem corner on Taylor Road.

The board approved a budget of \$2,020,911 for the Fiscal Year 2021. The budget will now appear before voters at town meeting. The budget represents a 5.1% increase over FY 2020 or a dollar increase of \$98,870.

The largest single driver of the increase was the cost of Hardwick Police Department's services, which rose this year by \$24,085 for a total of \$297,874. The second-largest individual cost driver was the payroll and benefits category, with an increase of \$14,462 or 2.7%.

The two largest increases in this category were health insurance and payroll. On the appropriations side, the Hardwick Rescue Squad (HRS) is requesting the largest increase. HRS is asked for a total of \$15,773, or \$5,773 from last year's appropriation.

New for this year, the Vermont Council on Rural Development asked for \$1,000. Other requested increases were from North-

east Kingdom Human Services, increasing by \$724 for a total of \$1,524, and the Lanesville Family Center up \$500 from last year to \$1,000.

The board discussed multiple options for cutting future budgets. Board Chair Peter Romans noted that with a 5 percent yearly budget increase, taxes will double over 14 years. Board member Tracy Collier said that is unaffordable. Board member Andy Kahler said of the budget, "It was hard not to just start trying to cut things. I look at it as a 5.1 percent increase, and it looks like a lot."

Board member Matt McAllister spoke of the poor quality of plowing service this year. He suggested cutting towed-fueled plowing the service. "But it would not come out of the budget significantly," Romans said he thought it was an interesting idea, but there have been multiple votes on the subject in the past, and they don't "bat over the fence."

He added that everyone would pay more for plowing if the town stopped running the service. "But it would not come out of the budget is the difference," said McAllister. "Trying to cut small pennies," McAllister said, "does not work."

The board talked about looking into other policing options when the IFO contract comes up for renewal.

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Water flowed rapidly through the Jackson Dam on the corner of Routes 14 and 15 in Hardwick over the weekend. Rain and warm temperatures brought heavy rain but no flooding in the area.

Big, Last-Minute Budget Surprise from Act 46

by Emmott Avery

HARDWICK — John Smith, chief financial officer for the Orleans Southwest Supervisory Union (OSSU), received an unwelcome email on January 3 notifying him that Hazen Union and

the Orleans Southwest Union Elementary District would be on the hook for an additional \$910,000 due to a previously unknown — to Smith and the OSSU — provision of Act 46.

The issue has to do with per-pupil spending. The more a school spends, or the fewer students it has in relation to its expenses, the higher a school's per-pupil spending will be. This per-pupil spending number, once calculated, is then put through a somewhat complex formula based on numbers provided by the state that will eventually produce the town's tax rate. Through this calculation, property tax rates can go up or per-pupil spending goes up, independent of whether a school's budget has increased.

In the past, if a school district lost more than 3.5% of its equalized pupil count in a given year, the state would set a floor that would artificially keep a school's pupil count from dropping below the 3.5% threshold, thereby reducing the yearly increase in per-pupil spending, to create a more gradual increase in the tax rate. However, according to Smith, there is an Act 46 provision which says that any district that did not voluntarily merge under one of the state's many previous merger attempts or through Act 46 will no longer be eligible for the state's assistance with equal-

ized pupil loss.

According to Smith, Hazen and the Orleans Southwest Union Elementary District (OSUED) experienced a 6% and 8% decrease in equalized pupils, respectively, for the past year. This decrease in equalized pupils had led to the current cost increases. To make matters worse, according to Smith, the provision is retroactive for three years.

Smith says that the provision did not appear in any of his briefing materials from the state before this last-minute email. The OSSU attorneys did not catch the provision either. When questioned after the meeting, Smith said that the attorneys for the OSSU had read the document, but "from a very different perspective than implementation."

All of the schools in the OSSU, according to Smith, are now susceptible to this new expense if they lose more than 3.5% of their equalized pupil count in a year. He said this new arrangement will continue into the future, though he thinks that enough schools will be hit by the provision that the legislature may be forced to take action. In a discussion this week, Smith said that he thinks the provision was meant to encourage schools to merge earlier in the process, rather than as a punitive measure.

See SURPRISE, 5

Postal Worker Charged With Identity Theft, Fraud

by Doug McClure

HARDWICK — On January 13, former Hardwick postal employee Desiree Martin pleaded not guilty to a felony count of Identity Theft — First Offense and a misdemeanor count of False Pretense or False Tokens \$900 or Less.

The felony count could result in up to three years' imprisonment and/or a fine of \$5,000; the misdemeanor, up to one year imprisonment and/or \$1,000. The charges stem from a diverted August money order of \$500 purchased by resident June Draper.

Police say Draper contacted Hardwick Police Department (HPD) Detective Kevin Lehou in October to report her rent money order had not arrived. Lehou wrote in his affidavit ("Draper advised someone had cashed her money order that she had sent through the mail." He said further investigation showed that "Alliance Property Management was crossed out [on the money order] and was rewritten to June Draper and that signature was used to cash the money order and envelope, she placed the envelope in

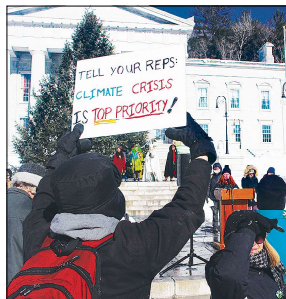
DMV search found no match for, according to the affidavit.

Lehou wrote that he spoke with Union Bank and the instrument had a bank stamp from HSBC, which has no branches locally. Its closest branch is in Canada.

With Union Bank advising that HSBC might not respond in a timely fashion to inquiries, Lehou wrote that he returned to the origin of the instrument, the Hardwick Post Office. He said he spoke with Postal Inspector Christine Miller to track the money and Miller advised he was called at the Hardwick Post Office the same day it was purchased. US Postal Service Special Agent Brian Richards informed Detective Lehou that the only person on duty during the times in question was Martin, who handled both the purchase and cashing of the instrument at her drawer.

Lehou wrote the Draper told him "she does the same process every time and remembers the transaction including Martin handling the transaction...she was positive that after she filled out the money order and envelope, she placed the envelope in

See FRAUD, 5



A climate action march in Munguelton on Thursday saw over 100 activists attend to demand substantial overhaul of the energy and transportation sectors of our economy.

Local Activists Call for Overhaul of Energy Policies

by Michael Bielawski

MONTPELIER — Over a hundred climate activists converged at the front lawn of the state-house just hours before about a dozen of them interrupted the State of the State address by Gov. Phil Scott on Thursday. The activists demanded that the government take more action to curb carbon emissions to curb the rate of climate change. Nancy Kellough from Hardwick was long based at the forefront of the state-house. "I know that the governor is stalling on any significant climate change impacts. It's all wait and see, technology will fix it," Kellough said. She said she was more impressed by a speech by Lieutenant Governor David Zuckerman, one of the more

climate-focused politicians. "I've been in his for five years. The impacts are happening," she said. "You don't have to be a farmer to know." Another activist at the rally was Bob Atkinson from Plainfield. He sees some basic areas in which the government could be doing more. "The state as an entity can start doing a little bit of something," he said. "I don't think there's one building on this block that's not audited for energy," he said. Some of the climate measures being discussed this year at the statehouse include the Transportation Climate Initiative (TCI) and the Global Warming Solutions Act. Atkinson described each as "these are too little, too late."

member states are allotted a set amount of carbon emissions and any additional emissions must come at an extra cost to the fuel producers. Scott has told media recently he won't sign Vermont onto the TCI if it in any way resembles a carbon tax. New Hampshire recently opted not to sign onto the initiative. The Global Warming Solutions Act would promote carbon-reduction measures such as alternative energy, often wind and solar power, and electric cars. Measurable reductions in carbon emissions would become law, with penalties for those who don't comply. Barry Kade, of Montpelier, is also joining that the state takes more action. "It appears to me that the legislation believes that the

See OVERHAUL, 5



A blue sky peeks at a bird feeder on Thursday, January 9, while outside temperatures did not get out of the mid-20s.



The North Calais Community Hall Association has received a revitalization grant to stabilize the 185-year-old building.

North Calais Memorial Hall Wins \$100,000 Grant

NORTH CALAIS — The North Calais Memorial Hall Association (NCMHA) and a community-wide effort to save Memorial Hall has received a Paul Bruhn Historic Revitalization Grant. The \$100,000 grant will help stabilize the 1885-1886 building, closed since 2012 due to structural deterioration.

"The Association is grateful to Senator Leahy, Paul Bruhn and the Preservation Trust of Vermont (PTV) for all their help and for encouraging our small and dedicated group to accomplish great things," said Debby Haskins, president of the NCMHA. "Thanks to the Paul Bruhn grant, the Association has now secured a three-quarter of the funding needed to kick off construction of this long-awaited revitalization project."

"Paul believed that in preserving our historic structures for public use we can sustain the vibrancy and quality of life in small, rural communities throughout Vermont. It's a vision I share, and I can say with confidence that the revitalization of the North Calais Memorial Hall will contribute in those ways," said Scott Syring. "Leahy's Naming this grant for

him is a testimony to Paul's dedicated public service spanning more than four decades and to his longstanding commitment to preserving the history and rural Vermont and rural America."

The PTV received over 400 applications, and Memorial Hall is one of seven inaugural award winners. "I'd like to thank PTV intern president, 'These are incredibly difficult decisions to make. In awarding these grants to a range of projects around the state, we are thrilled and thankful that Senator Leahy and the National Park Service are committed to sustaining Paul Bruhn's historic preservation legacy in Vermont across the nation. This project is supported through a grant from the National Park Service's Sustained Stewardship Program as administered by the National Park Service, Department of the Interior."

Since the rehabilitation is completed, Memorial Hall will be reopened as a place where the community can honor the sacrifices of Calais's Veterans, celebrate a grant through the historic Revitalization program for the waters of Mirror Lake.

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