

ALL ABOUT TOWN

Stuart A. Hurd, Town Manager

It's that time of year. The annual Town Meeting is just two weeks away. It's been very busy through January so I'm a little late in getting this out. So let's talk FY 2023 budget and agency funding requests which will appear on the ballot. You can find my presentation to the Board and information on the agencies at <https://benningtonvt.org/meetings/select-board/>. Remember, the Board makes some changes from the original presentation. The Board's proposed budget which combines the General, Highway and Fire Funds is proposed at an increase of 4.03%. The General Fund which includes all the administrative services, including my office, accounting, collections, permitting, as well as Police and Recreation is proposed to increase 3.41%. The Highway Fund is proposed to increase 4.51% due principally to the increase in the cost of materials and the Fire Fund is proposed to increase 15.06% due to the addition of the ladder truck bond payments. The impact on the tax rates is as follows: General Fund an increase of \$0.0340 (this includes the agencies to be voted on the ballot which make up approximately \$0.01 of this total); Highway Fund an increase of \$0.0184; and Fire Fund an increase of \$0.0136 for a total projected increase of \$0.0660. This projection is based on last year's Grand List. Any increase in the Grand List will reduce this projection. This 4.03% increase in the tax rate seems higher than normal, but remember inflation is currently running at 7.5% through January 2022. I can assure you that the staff and the Board worked very hard to keep the budget as low as possible while providing necessary services to the community. We ask that you please support the budget this year.

The Safety and Equity Taskforce has now completed its work. The final report will be presented to the Select Board on February 21 at a special meeting for that purpose. The Board will then take comments from the public and then review the report in public meetings on March 14 and March 28. The Board plans to act on the report on March 28 after the public discussion is completed.

There has been much confusion regarding American Recovery Plan Act (ARPA) funds and the long list of potential projects developed by the Economic Strategy and Infrastructure Committee. The list of projects is simply that. We felt it necessary to lay out before the community all of the projects that remain on the horizon now and into the future. The ARPA funds are to be targeted towards those projects which are eligible, ready, and impactful. Although the eligibility requirements have been loosened somewhat, each project selected and constructed or implemented will need to be reported on and justified. One can't just spend the money as one wished. Therefore, projects such as the improvements to Benn Hi for the Senior Center and Meals on Wheels programs as well as the gymnasium and the replacement of the playgrounds at Willow Park rise to the top. Projects such as the Putnam Block phase 2, although impactful are not yet ready. At its last meeting, the Board authorized the staff to spend ARPA funds (up to \$185,000) to digitize our land records, a worthy project, eligible and ready. If one looks at the entire list, I'm sure one could find a project that is most important to that individual. But does it meet the criteria? Is it eligible, ready, and impactful for the greater community?

There is a "project" now being considered by the Legislature. That is allocating \$390,000 of State monies to the Pathways Vermont organization. Already operating in six counties, these folks work with the chronically homeless to provide them, not only a place to live, but also necessary services to keep them well. I am truly hopeful that the Legislature will see the benefit to Bennington County.

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.