

ALL ABOUT TOWN

Stuart A. Hurd, Town Manager

Spring arrived this morning. The mask mandates and recommendations are being allowed to lapse. Is it possible that 2022 will see more of a return to normal? Even with this good news, there are signs of another omicron variant making waves in Europe and elsewhere. So, folks, let's be careful and stay safe and healthy.

Let me thank all who voted in the Annual Town Meeting. Thank you for your support of the Town's budget. It passed more than two to one. The tax rates won't be set until June 2022. By then we'll know the Grand List impact and be able to accurately set the rates.

With the Safety and Equity Taskforce's work completed the Select Board has now taken on the task of balancing the work of the Taskforce with the comments received from the public and the legal implications outlined by municipal counsel. Although under current law, a new committee may not have investigatory authority or personnel oversight, there is much an advisory and review committee can do to work with the police and the community to improve relations and understanding. The Select Board sub-committee will report back to the full Board on March 28th. We'll see what develops and what direction the Board will take.

At its most recent meeting, the Board authorized the staff to move forward using ARPA funds to reimagine and upgrade the playgrounds at Willow Park. A vendor has been selected and now the design review phase begins. Staff are working to bring the designs to the public for its input. If all goes well, the new playgrounds will be in place by July/August 2022. The Board also authorized a one-time hazard pay for hours worked for all current municipal employees for their efforts to serve the community from March 2020 to March 2021, the height of the pandemic. Additional benefits, dental and vision, were also authorized for a one-year period. These two actions, a thank you to our employees, will be done using ARPA funds. Another exciting project on the tier one list, the repurposing of Benn Hi is being actively pursued. The 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.

The Select Board also threw its support behind an effort to bring Pathways Vermont to Bennington County. I mentioned this in my last column. It is an extremely successful organization that helps the chronically homeless not only find housing, but also find and maintain a healthy lifestyle.

At this same meeting, the Board voted to support an Arts Grant for Eric Peterson. Eric is working with a group of people who are focused on the 250th anniversary of the Battle of Bennington. Eric plans to write and direct a play featuring the lead up to and the Battle of Bennington.

With the arrival of Spring comes the planning for the next construction season. Rising prices and disruptions caused by the war in Ukraine may limit the amount we can accomplish this year. 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. With possible additional funds coming to the State from the Federal government, our goals may be met.

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.