

## ALL ABOUT TOWN

Stuart A. Hurd, Town Manager

As unfortunate as it is, COVID persists. Two new variants are now circulating. Even those vaccinated are falling ill. My advice to you all is when the next round of boosters is offered, go for it. And let's continue to be careful and stay safe and healthy.

At its last meeting, the Select Board heard from the Opioid Response Team on what's happening currently and what is on the horizon. The news that we're seeing the numbers of fatal overdoses declining is good. The news that we may, in the near future, have the Hub and Spoke model of treatment options available here is fantastic. The news that two recovery housing options are possible for Bennington is also great. At long last, the community will have real options to help people stop using and be able to find a way back to a healthy, productive life. The real solution to this crisis is treatment and education. If we eliminate the demand, we eliminate the suppliers.

At this same meeting, we heard from Chief Doucette and Lieutenant Grande about the uptick in violence and the growing presence of firearms in the drug trade in and around Bennington. Our Police Department is working with its State and Federal partners to identify these individuals and remove them from our midst. Our officers are well trained, well equipped, and ready when necessary to protect and enhance our public safety. And yes, they are also ready to join in community activities and work with various groups and individuals to enhance our quality of life. We are lucky to have them.

The repurposing of the former Benn High is moving along. A construction management firm has been selected. Goldstone Architects are developing schematic designs which will be reviewed by the various potential users. The schematic design and a cost estimate for the planned improvements will be presented to the public through a Select Board meeting. Prior to the Board's review, the schematic design will be shared with seniors and others in special meetings arranged for that purpose. Uses under consideration are a new, expanded Senior Center, an expanded Meals on Wheels kitchen and dining facility, and a new gymnasium with adjoining space for community recreation programming. I understand now that the Vermont Arts Exchange is interested in utilizing space there as well. The remainder of the building is projected to be developed by Shires Housing and will consist of housing for seniors and others. Shires Housing is now performing its due diligence. Bennington's Tax Financing District (TIF) extension has been approved and will be available should the need arise.

The newly relocated Morgan Spring delivery station has been completed and is operating. It is a much more efficient and safe design. No more will tanker trucks be clogging up Bradford Street. It was constructed with financial assistance from DS Services of America doing business as Primo Waters of North America. The company will be the principal purchaser of the Spring water.

At the last Select Board meeting, a resident asked if a spigot could be placed so as to allow residents to get free spring water. I answered "no". It is not under consideration at this time. There are several reasons. Foremost is that the ratepayers of Bennington pay to operate the Spring and its associated infrastructure. Giving spring water away for free seems to me to be unfair to them. Other reasons are more design in nature. How do we protect it from freezing, from tampering, from being left running, and from large hauls of water by those with the time and capabilities to haul large quantities? There may be a way to design an appropriate system that would offer Spring water to our residents if the design issues can be cured, and we can find a way to receive some compensation for the water taken.

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.