

The Athenian

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FEBRUARY 2021

A Time of Change—A Time of Hope

Here we are in mid-winter, a time when things usually slow down as the snow piles up and everything freezes. But we live in times that are anything but normal. The relentless spread of the COVID virus, the debate over restarting the economy or closing down further have become central issues of our time. We also have the debate over the safety of opening our schools or continuing virtual learning. Add to that the possible end of our school merger and how to safely get through our Annual Town Meeting. That is quite a list.

But there is hope. The vaccines that hold out the possibility of life eventually becoming something near normal. The possibility of more Federal relief for those in real need offers hope and a start of an economic comeback. For us locally, the Annual Town Meeting will be like nothing seen before as the details are being hammered out shows our determination to keep democracy front and center. The debate over school mergers will come down to people voting their wishes.



Photo - Jay Maciejowski

- Dennis Hunt

Select Board Meeting Tidbits

In addition to news in other pieces below, here are a few things from the January Select Board meeting that might be of interest:

- It was asked if Taylor Hill Rd. could be sanded by the town following a storm. That was not an option, but Taylor Hill residents can access sand at the town garage for their road, and can use their own equipment to load the sand. Town equipment cannot be used to load sand for residents.
- It was requested that the Athenian be informed about special meetings in the future.
- There was a discussion on final details for the budget in preparation for Town Meeting. The Board voted to accept the budget as presented.

- Lynn Morgan shared information regarding the school budget and the upcoming votes related to the imposed merged district and the election of school board directors.

- Hannah Regier noted that the Town's current subscription level with Google no longer includes the ability to record virtual meetings and if the Board felt that was important they would need to pay more per month.

- David Bemis reported that the Board met the previous week in executive session to discuss the report from the engineer that was hired by the Taylor Hill residents as outlined by the Board's August 2020 decision.

The Board had questions that were sent through their lawyer to Bob Fisher, the lawyer for the Taylor Hill residents. There was a lengthy discussion, with some of the questions addressed, and Fisher indicated that the engineering report states that Taylor Hill Rd. does meet the Town's road specifications. David continued to direct all exchanges to be in writing rather than in a back and forth in a Zoom meeting. When asked how others in town can be fully informed, David stated that documents including the engineer report, the August 25 hearing decision from the board and a communication from Marc Pickering at the VTrans can be obtained through the town office.

- The Board worked through the items that will be on the warning for the Town Report. Adjustments were made due to the change to Australian ballot voting and they will add any corrections that may be needed.
- David asked Matt Perry to explain the warranty for the Freightliner, and Matt turned the discussion over to Janet Perry. She then discussed her research and recommended a 2-yr plan that can cover a truck up to 10 years old provided it passes an approval inspection. The cost for that would be \$200, and

the warranty, if approved is \$9300. The Board approved this plan.

- Matt reports that salt consumption is much lower with the new salt from Apalachee Salt.
- The Meetinghouse has submitted a grant application that if awarded, will enable exterior work to begin this spring. A very generous private donation was recently made to the Athens Historic Preservation Society on behalf of the Meetinghouse, for this exterior work in particular. Denise asked about plans to repay the loan balance from the Housing Rehab Fund. The committee is working to get the building up to a standard where it can begin generating income to pay back that loan.
- It was noted that candidate consent forms were due on or before Jan. 25, and that Dennis Mirante had filed for the Select Board position. (Note- he has since withdrawn his name; the candidates on the ballot for Select Board will be Janet Perry and Danny Taylor.)
- The Board called for an executive session to discuss a legal matter. Prior to starting that, there was a discussion about how the public would be able to reenter the meeting following the executive session. It was decided that the Board would move to a phone conference for the executive session which lasted 15 minutes. No decisions or motions were made.



Photo - Jay Maciejowski

- Sherry Maher

A Note on Ballots and More

As of this writing, it is our understanding that Australian ballots for the March 2 vote will soon be available at the Town Office. You can request to have absentee ballots (1 for the articles and 1 for officers) mailed to you by calling Darlene. The polls will be open on March 2, 2021 from 10:00 AM to 7:00 PM for in person voting or to drop off a completed ballot. If you mail your ballot be sure you allow enough time for it to reach the Town Office by Monday, March 1st.

The Board has set the virtual informational meeting for 6:00 PM Thursday, February 25, 2021. This meeting is to discuss the articles, not the offices or candidates running for office.

Watch for more details on the town website. If you have any questions, contact Darlene or check out the detailed FAQs about Town Meetings on the Vermont League of Cities and Towns website -- <https://www.vlct.org/town-meeting-covid-19-faqs>

Sherry Maher

Budget Committee Update

The budget has been finalized and will be printed in the town report. The overall budget is lower than last year. We were able to roll over a \$45,000 surplus from 2020 to reduce 2021 taxes. The surplus was a result of lower spending and greater grant revenue than budgeted for. Additionally, there will be an article for the town to vote on asking to use the unspent \$32,000 that had been specifically voted on last year for constructing a bathroom in the town garage to further lower 2021 taxes. The other budget related article this year is asking to reduce trash pickup to every-other-week, on alternating weeks from recycling pickup. The cost of trucking has increased by 30%, and this reduction in service would keep the trash and recycling removal budget at just slightly above last year's cost. The \$44,000 figure in the budget reflects the new trucking prices. If the town votes to reduce service, that figure would go down to \$38,300.

- Hannah Regier

NOTES FROM THE SCHOOL BOARD

The WNUESD budget has been set. We are up 2%. However, many numbers we are working with are not definite, only estimated until the state legislature finalizes its numbers. The dissolving of the Windham Northeast Union Elementary School District is in its second stage. Westminster has voted to leave the Union, now Athens and Grafton, individually, need to vote to accept or not accept Westminster's request.

On Town Meeting Day, which will be done with Australian ballots instead of in person - there will be 6 ballots.

A) 2 ballots for Athens town business – 1 for Town articles, 1 for officers.

B) A 3-town unified K-8 school district ballot for budget, officers, and 3 school directors elected for 2-year terms. (One school director for each of the 3 towns, and all 3 elected by all 3 towns.)

C) Unified school district ballot specific to Athens regarding the yes/no question on allowing the Westminster withdrawal

D) Union High School District ballot

E) River Valley Tech. Career Center Ballot

The melt down in the SU financial office end of 2019 into 2020 has been reconciled. The audits from 2018 through 2020 have all been completed as of this month. The office has gotten a much better handle on how to use the flawed financial system mandated by the state. A huge thanks goes out to Flora and her team for the

dedicated work they have done working with the auditors and putting the office back into a well-functioning entity.

The SU has found a new building to move into that is hugely more energy efficient than the current building. As a result, there will be a large economic savings on the SU budget. With the help of a grant the offices will be moving to the new location in Westminster Station over the Winter Break this February.
- Lynn Morgan

Should Westminster be Allowed to Withdraw?

As part of the balloting on Town Meeting Day, Tuesday, March 2nd, Athens voters will be asked to consider the following:

“Shall the voters of Athens approve and ratify the withdrawal of the Town of Westminster from the Windham Northeast Union Elementary School District, subject to the certification of Westminster’s January 5, 2021 vote to withdraw?” Under state statute, Athens and Grafton must each independently vote “yes” in order for Westminster’s withdrawal to succeed.

Currently Westminster has 2,689 of the district’s 3482 registered voters, or 77%. Grafton has 525 voters (15%) and Athens has 268 voters (8%). Representation to the WNUESD board consists of 2 school directors from each town, and the district seats 3 of the 9-member Supervisory Union board. As part of the formula for taxation, the State of Vermont estimates that Westminster has an Equalized Headcount of 260.69 pupils (75% of district total) and Athens and Grafton combined have 88.31 pupils (25%). The Athens – Grafton portion of the WNUSED budget adopted on 01/07/21 is \$1,766,724.00, or 25.4% of the overall budget of \$6,954,684.00.

In reporting to the Grafton News, Grafton school advisory commission member Hardy Merrill comments that “Since consolidation it appears that the WNUESD has not achieved any significant savings as promised by the Agency of Education.” In a front-page article in the January 27 issue of The Commons, Grafton’s Jack Bryar explains that “The schools are nearly 40 minutes apart from each other, making it nearly impossible to share staff or move students from one location to another.” Merrill points out, in effect, that voters have the choice of remaining in a larger 3-town district which may provide more stable Homestead tax rates as student populations rise and fall in each town, vs. more local control and more direct ability (with Athens) to determine how both towns’ children will be educated in the future.

Athens school advisory commission member Don Capponcelli urges Athens voters to watch for warnings for separate informational meetings for the Town of

Athens, WNUSED and the Bellows Falls Union High School District. More information is being collected. Don can be reached at 869-2590. – Don Capponcelli

A Note on School Warnings

The following Articles will be before voters in Athens on 2 of the multiple Australian ballots that you will be asked to cast your votes on by 7 PM on March 2, 2021.

-Shall the voters of the Town of Athens approve and ratify the withdrawal of the Town of Westminster from the Windham Northeast Elementary Union School District, subject to the certification of Westminster’s January 5, 2021 vote to withdraw?

-To elect by ballot, the following officers of the District from among its qualified voters, to serve a one-year term:

- Moderator
- Clerk
- Treasurer

-Shall the voters of the Windham Northeast Union Elementary School District appropriate the sum of \$6,954,684 (Six million, nine hundred fifty-four thousand, six hundred eighty-four dollars) which is the amount that the board has determined to be necessary for the ensuing year? It is estimated that this proposed budget, if approved, will result in education spending estimated to be \$18,533 (Eighteen thousand, five hundred thirty-three dollars) per “equalized pupil” under the current state formula for calculating this figure. This projected spending per equalized pupil is 1.07% less than last year.

-To elect by ballot, the following Board members of the District, from among its qualified voters, for the terms stated below?

Reserved for residents of Athens, to be elected at large by the entire District:

-1 member for a two-year term beginning 2021.

Reserved for residents of Westminster, to be elected at large by the entire District:

-1 member for a two-year term beginning 2021.

Reserved for residents of Grafton, to be elected at large by the entire District:

-1 member for a two-year term beginning 2021.

Shall the Windham Northeast Union Elementary School District vote to pay its District Officers compensation as directed by the board for their terms of service?

These Articles were shared by Nicole Barnette, Secretary to the Superintendent at the request of Jack Bryar, Chair – Grafton.

Vaccine Available to Vermonters Aged 75+

It's official—the public COVID-19 vaccine rollout is underway in Vermont. Vermonters aged 75 and older can now register for an appointment and get a free vaccine at a local clinic.

The quickest way to sign-up for an appointment is online at <https://www.HealthVermont.gov/MyVaccine>. If that is not an option, you can also make an appointment by calling (855) 722-7878.

Tips for your appointment:

- Please do not arrive earlier than 15 minutes before your appointment.
- Bring only one person with you if you need assistance.
- Wear a mask.
- Dress for the weather – it's cold out there!
- Your second dose appointment will be scheduled while you are at the clinic.
- If you need to reschedule, please call (855) 722-7878.

While we wait for the vaccines to become more widely available to Vermonters, remember to keep up prevention efforts to keep the virus from spreading—including getting tested. Testing is quick, easy and free at more than 15 regular testing locations for people without symptoms. Many locations are now open daily, and some have evening and weekend hours.

For more info on COVID-19 testing or to sign-up, visit <https://www.HealthVermont.gov/Testing>.

From the VT Dept of Health, via the Front Porch Forum

Food News You Can Use

Below is a list of local sites where food assistance is available at no or little cost to you. Please get the word out to your friends and neighbors about these programs as we go through these uncertain times.

Grafton Community Church Food Pantry. The Grafton Community Church is sponsoring free food for pickup at the Church during the week. Staples such as pasta, tomato sauce, jam, oatmeal, and sometimes even frozen meat are available. Give Mary Feder a call at the church at 843-2346 and leave your name and phone number or email graftonchurch@gmail.com to arrange a pickup time. Food can be brought to your car and “social distancing” will be maintained along with wearing a mask. Delivery can also be arranged.

Veggie van Go Leland & Gray Lower Parking Lot Free food is available each month at the high school. The date this month is Wednesday, February 10th from 12-1. Just drive to the lower parking lot, stay in your car, and a box will be brought out and put into your trunk. The purpose of the program is to help people obtain fresh fruits and vegetables to sustain a healthy lifestyle. All are welcome and no proof of eligibility is required. This

is hosted by Grace Cottage Hospital and sponsored by the Vermont Food Bank.

Townshend Community Food Shelf. The long-time food shelf is open and providing food to those who need it. They have limited fruit, vegetables, milk, frozen meat, and fresh bread. They also have canned food, pasta, rice, and shelf stable proteins.

They are located in the Townshend Church and are open every Monday from 6pm to 7pm. Line up with your car and you will be given a number and let into the pantry as a group and out a separate exit. Be sure to wear your mask. If you have questions please call 365-4348. Their mailing address is P.O. Box 542, Townshend, VT 05353.

Meals On Wheels. Senior Solutions in Springfield, VT sponsors a Meals on Wheels program for seniors and those with disabilities. Grafton Cares provides pickup and delivery three times a week, Monday, Wednesday, Friday. The meals are prepared in the kitchen of Valley Cares Assisted Living in Townshend. Sign up is straight forward. Call Senior Solutions Senior Help Line at 1-800-642-5119 for all the particulars and enjoy having meals delivered to your door in Athens and Grafton.

Quadruple Your EBT Benefits at the Brattleboro Winter Farmers Market – Do you have 3SquaresVT/SNAP benefits? Now through March, when you use 3SquaresVT/SNAP or P/EBT benefits for a curbside pickup order at the Brattleboro Winter Farmers Market, you'll get up to \$30 extra in Crop Cash and Food Boost to purchase fruits, veggies and more. That means \$10 in EBT buys \$40 of local food! Orders can be made online from 9AM Monday morning to 9 AM Thursday morning for pick up the following Saturday. Call Sherry at 869-2141 to find out more or go to www.brattleborowinterfarmersmarket.org.

-Dennis Hunt

Grafton Cares Dreams On

With our heads still chock full of memories, all of us at Grafton Cares feed on them to sustain our hopes for a not too distant time when the Chapel kitchen or that of the Athens Church will again be abuzz with activity and chatter as yet another luncheon or dinner is being prepared. What a roster of super-star cooks will be there busy with main dishes, side dishes, soups, salads, breads, and desserts! And best of all, we'll treasure the wonderful sense of community as people take their seats and warm to the conversation as much as the food.

Let's consider the forced hiatus we've had to endure as a sort of extended hibernation which we all know will end when spring arrives---be that next summer, fall, or whenever. The point is, just hang in there!

Over the past month, we have done the following: delivered Meals on Wheels to nine customers, provided

\$160 in gas cards for medical appointments, and delivered three Sunshine Baskets.

Maggie Stewart--head of the gas card program--had a phone problem last month that may have caused some confusion. The phone has been fixed, so anyone needing Maggie's assistance should call her at 843-2487.

All the best to everyone! - *Bill Toomey*

WHPA Seeks to Conserve Massey Property

WHPA is now preparing to acquire and preserve the 615+/- acre Massey property. This land lies to the west of the Pinnacle ridgeline, in the immediate view from the Pinnacle, located in Athens, Brookline, and Townshend. It's what we see in the foreground below us when we look out to the sunset. Because it meets the Pinnacle boundary at the access point of the Town Line Trail on Grassy Brook Road, it is contiguous with the 2100 acres already conserved by WHPA.

This remarkable property deserves protection. Its unfragmented forest is primary habitat for bear and moose; the wetlands and vernal pools support the endangered Northern Bulrush along with other uncommon plants, and wood turtles live in the watershed of Grassy Brook. Near the highest point—over 1700 feet—lie two pristine ponds, containing beaver colonies, a heron rookery, and excellent habitat for several species of ducks. Since undeveloped ponds are rare in our area, their protection is crucial. The entire property lies in state ranked priority habitat block, and connects to another large conserved property to the south. By allowing the trees to grow on this large tract, there will be ongoing carbon sequestration and storage for mitigation of climate change impacts, a vital step for our planet that the Pinnacle is perfectly poised to take!

Formerly owned by the late Jim Massey of Westminster West, the land is now in the hands of his nephews in Ohio. The purchase price of \$500,000, is hefty, but the owners have agreed to sell to the Pinnacle below the appraised value of \$610,000; they want to carry out their uncle's wish that it be conserved.

Raising funds to meet the purchase price is a challenge that the Pinnacle is meeting head-on, with growing momentum! We are asking you to join that momentum by making a donation now to boost funding to the full purchase price.

The protection of this land will be an enormous gift to future generations, as our climate changes and many species (including our own) seek new habitat. Right now, we are preparing to purchase the property. The conservation easement will follow that step, which will guarantee that the land stays undeveloped, that the habitat will be there for the beaver to build and the heron to nest.

The WHPA is committed to building a trail through the property to Lily Pond, and other trail options are being studied. All trails will be laid out to ensure the protection of fragile wetlands and avoid adverse impacts to wildlife, forest habitat, and Lily Pond. This trail will include a trailhead and parking at Grassy Brook Road that will serve both the existing Townline Trail and the new trail, an improvement for both!

To learn more about this project or how you can support it with your donation, visit the WHPA website at: www.windmillhillpinnacl.org.

- *James "Silos" Roberts*

Library Corner

Smiles and Gratitude

We are honored to announce the following special donations to the Grafton Public Library 2020 Annual Appeal: in memory of Larry Middleton, Bill Walters, Bill Chapman, and Karen S. Hall.

In addition, much gratitude to the Bodman family for their generous support for juvenile literature and building repairs, the Paulsen/Russell family for their generous support for children's programming and materials, the Watson/Welch family for their generous support of adult programming, via the Lucy Daniels Fund and the Windham Foundation for support from the Grafton Fund. These donors and many others have been vital in sustaining the library. Your kindness has



Photo - Andy Toepfer

allowed us to continue to serve the community during this challenging time and we thank you all very much.

Thanks also goes out to Bri Grady for the gorgeous amaryllis now blooming on the circulation desk, to Carol Wright and Michelle Chickering for donations related to mask-making, to David Whittall for recycling and trash removal, to the Windham Foundation for snowplowing and to Dana Wu for the donation of new books for the collection.

A reminder: please do NOT place any donations of used books or materials (including DVDs or magazines) in our book drop for the library. We do not have any room for them at this time. Thank you for your understanding.

Upcoming Programs

Bill Toomey joins us mid-month for a second storytelling event: Tavern Tales. Bill was employed at the Grafton Inn for several decades and he has a rich treasure trove of tales to delight during these rather dark days. Please make sure to contact the library to register for this on-line program. Love the great outdoors and books? We've combined the two in a co-sponsored monthly program with The Nature Museum. Details are below. Our weekly Spanish sessions are lively and geographically diverse—we've had attendees from California, Colorado, Vermont and Spain in one session! If you want to practice intermediate conversational Spanish—this is the on-line group for you.

February Programs:

Spanish Conversation on Zoom, Tuesdays 11am, intermediate level

Tavern Tales with Storyteller Extraordinaire, Bill Toomey on Zoom, Friday, February 19 7-8:30 pm Contact the library to register and for more information. Nature & Books Winter Series on Zoom: Wednesday, February 24, 6-7:30pm, Jimmy Bluefeather by Kim Heacox, Wednesday, March 24, 6-7:30pm, Vesper Flights by Helen MacDonald.

Contact the library to register and for more information. 843-2404 or librarian@graftonpubliclibrary.org.

-Michelle Dufort

Annual Cabin Fever Auction

Too much time stuck at home? Ready to dream for the future?

Grace Cottage's Annual Cabin Fever Auction, online February 14-24, offers a chance to bid on Caribbean trips, an African safari, plus outings to local restaurants, inns, and fun outdoor venues.

Also included are locally made crafts and foods (cheeses, jams, preserves, baked goods, goat milk caramels, and more), plus a varied array of gift certificates for hair salons, auto services, groceries, coffee, and more. Or choose to be famous: bid to have a character named after you in Archer Mayer's next book.

There's something for every taste and budget, including treasures you can't buy anywhere else, ranging in value from \$20 to Priceless.

Generous local businesses and individuals donate this awesome array of items. All proceeds benefit the Grace Cottage Patient Care Fund.

To learn more, see items, and bid, visit www.32auctions.com/gracecottage2021 – *C.J. King*

Entries From A Weather Journal

We think of Valentine's Day as a day of sunshine, flowers, and chocolates. But wait! What about the weather? Here are three memorable such days.

February, 2007: "A huge snowstorm is underway. Very large totals are expected. (About 2 feet of snow fell.) Temps: 17.5 to 0.9."

February, 2015: "Bone chilling cold. Expecting another snow storm with serious wind. What a winter! Temps: 7.0 to -4.5."

February, 2016: "Extremely cold and windy night with 18 degrees below zero. Sunny, dry today. Trying to warm up but a long way to go. Temps: 12.4 to -18.0"

-Dennis Hunt

Thoughts To Ponder

With Valentine's Day our thoughts turn to romance. Here are a few bits of advice, not necessarily to follow, but to put a smile on your face.

- (1) "Honesty is the key to a relationship. If you can fake that, you're in." *-Richard Jeni*
- (2) "All you need is love. But a little chocolate now and then doesn't hurt." *-Charles Schulz*
- (3) "An archaeologist is the best husband a woman can have. The older she gets the more interested he is in her." *-Agatha Christie*

-all quotes selected by Dennis Hunt

COMMUNITY INFORMATION

Select Board Meetings: 3rd Thursday 7:00 PM

Budget Committee: 2nd & 4th Tuesday 7:00 PM

Meeting House Committee: 2nd Monday 10:00 AM

School Board: 2nd Thursday 6:30 Grafton School

Do you have a news item for The Athenian or a favorite family story to share? Or would you like to be on our email list and get the newsletter in your inbox?

CONTACT US at theathenianvt@gmail.com.



UPCOMING RECYCLING DATES:

FEB 15 & MAR 1