

The Athenian

Volume 14, Number 7

Sponsored by Grafton Cares

MARCH 2024

Town Meeting Day - Your Turn for Direct Democracy

Vermont's Town Meeting tradition dates back to 1762. That March day residents gathered at John Fassett's tavern in Bennington, in what would become the state of Vermont. They elected their first town officers, and approved enticements for setting up a gristmill and a sawmill, decisions that helped the town flourish. This was the same year that a six-year old Mozart first played for royal courts in Europe.

Since that early time, Vermonters have grappled with issues large and small, having local, national and even international impact. Former Secretary of State Deb Markowitz cited these larger issues as one means of revitalizing Town Meetings, giving residents a means to formally register their stance on these important issues of their day - the nuclear arms race, acid rain, GMOs, or as they did in Chester way back in the year following the Boston Tea Party voting not to buy British nails leaving the new jail unfinished as part of a boycott.

Since the pandemic, many towns and cities have moved away from this long standing tradition of direct democracy, opting instead to conduct all business via Australian ballots. Yet this opportunity, to fully take on the role of direct legislators, is something that 95% of Americans can only dream of.

Here in Athens, we rejected the Australian ballot system for all articles to be voted on at Town Meetings or Special Meetings, but decided in December of 2021 to elect all officers by that system. This year, a group of residents have brought forth a petition asking voters to discontinue the use of Australian ballot for the election of officers, and return to the tradition of electing town officers from the floor. It's sure to be a lively debate with strong and valid points to be made on either side of the question. You'll need to be present this coming Monday, March 4th at 6:00 PM to have your voice heard on this issue.

- Sherry Maher



Select Board Meeting Tidbits

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

- Hannah shared that the application for funds for scoping on the community center and garage projects was approved. Hannah will have more detailed information particularly about the garage project at the next board meeting.
- Hannah has shared email information about new FEMA flood maps seeking high-level feedback. She suggests that the town stay close to this process because FEMA is mapping additional areas along the Bull Creek, and it is not known if the FEMA team actually came to Athens to map the flood areas.
- Stan Noga, selectboard member from Brookline spoke to the possibility of the two towns pooling personnel and resources. They have one part-time highway employee and are about to advertise for a second person to assist on an on-call basis. They also have an excavator and over-the-rail mower. Matt has had a few conversations about this and is open to it. Along with the benefits, there are hurdles such as contracts to clarify and formalize such arrangements, working out wages and insurance, and how to handle the added admin load for each town as this would likely have more work landing on the clerk/treasurer's desk. Exploration will continue with a motion for Matt, Janet and Krista to discuss further with representatives from Brookline.
- After a lengthy discussion with Jeff Slade from Southworth Milton, regarding an available used grader that is a good match for our needs, the board approved the purchase by a vote of 3 to 2, with David Bemis and Krista Gay voting no. A new comparable machine would cost \$425K. This used machine was for sale at \$150K, less the trade value of \$72.5k for

our current grader, for a net cost of \$77.5K. Discussion followed about what to put as a downpayment from the reserve fund and securing a 5-yr capital lease for the balance.

- Regarding policies, the board voted unanimously to adopt the new Conflict of Interest Policy and the new Delinquent Tax Policy. There was further discussion on the Driveway Access policy board unanimously voted to table discussion on that policy.
- Following a brief executive session on a legal matter, there was discussion about payment to Jimmy Frenette, a highway contractor. Hannah had not received any invoices for this work until the previous week, although some went back as far as August 2023. The board discussed the necessity of either having these mailed directly to the Town Office, or Matt being sure to hand them in to Hannah in a timely manner. A driveway access permit was considered and will be authorized pending clarification on the description in the application.

- Sherry Maher

An Elections Run Down for Athens Town Meeting Voting

Our Annual Town Meeting will be held on Monday, March 4, at 6 PM in the Community Center (the former elementary school, at 28 Brookline Rd.). The Town budget and all other articles on the Town Warning will be moved and voted from the floor. Voters will be asked to vote on a \$643,357 general budget, to consider returning to a weekly schedule with trash and recycling pick-up alternating from week to week, to return to voting officers from the floor as opposed to Australian ballot, to allow the sale of alcohol in the town, and whether to support 10 social service organizations.

The polls for Australian ballot voting will be open from 10 AM to 7 PM at the Town Office on Tuesday, March 5. There will be ballots for all town officers, the U.S. Presidential primaries, school board candidates and three school related ballots - budgets for Athens/Grafton School, Bellows Falls Union High School district and the River Valley Technical Center.

- Sherry Maher

Meet Your 1-year Selectboard Candidates

The Athenian invited all declared candidates and anyone mounting a write-in campaign to share a brief statement for the voters about themselves. Responses came in from our two candidates for the two 1-year Selectboard seats. Here is a brief summary of what they shared

From Sandi Capponcelli - After 45 years of living in Athens most of that time I have either volunteered or held an elected or appointed position in town. To me, it

is part of living in a small community, giving your time in one way or another to make sure the town not only survives but thrives. I believe if you live in a small community such as ours you should help your community in any way that you can. It's easy to complain about how things are done, it's harder to sit on a board, or a commission and come up with the ideas that will take our town into the future and keep it and it's residents safe.

From Krista Gay - I was born and raised in Athens, and came back home during Covid to work remotely after completing law school. I therefore have the unique experience of being a native Athenian, and also knowing what it's like to feel "new" here again. I want to make Athens a place where all feel welcome, and I want to help my neighbors thrive. I've worked hard to try to make the select board welcoming and to increase transparency by trying to help limit our number of executive sessions. I've also worked hard to make sure we're fiscally responsible, while also advocating for liveable wages and benefits for our employees. I care deeply about this town and my neighbors.

Grafton Cares News

February passed in a flash, from time to time disguising itself as spring. Our activities, however, continued as usual, and we were grateful that no severe weather caused us to cancel either community meals or Meals on Wheels.

During February, we provided the following: Meals on Wheels to 10 customers, \$125 in gas cards for medical appointments, 3 rides to medical appointments, 2 sunshine baskets, 1 welcome bag, 1 shawl from our knitters, and fuel assistance for 2 households. We also loaned 3 walkers, 2 shower seats, and 1 pair of crutches.

We are currently searching for new storage space for our medical equipment. The town of Athens has been most kind in allowing us to keep our extensive collection in the basement of the elementary school, but they now have need of that space. If anyone has a suitable dry place--barn, garage, etc.--that might serve our needs (200 square feet and cement or planked floor), we would be very grateful for your help.

Just call Kate Bova at 802-869-1527.

Our community meal calendar for March is as follows;

Friday, March 1, dinner at 6 p.m. in Athens

Wednesday, March 6, lunch at noon in Grafton

Friday, March 15, dinner at 6 p.m. in Grafton

Wednesday, March 20, lunch at noon in Grafton

Our Community dinners are always a great time to reconnect with neighbors and friends. We hope more of you will come and enjoy the good food and company.

- Bill Toomey

Special Meeting on New Policies

On Monday, February 12th the Selectboard held a special meeting to answer questions and hear public comments on three proposed policies for driveway/access, conflict of interest and delinquent taxes. There had been much discussion at previous board meetings about the driveway/access policy. Questions and concerns voiced at this meeting included what if any enforcement would follow if the policy were adopted, what was the reason for this new policy, and what were the origins of it. There were concerns raised about the origins of the language coming from another town's policy for new or enlarged developments, with standards meant for roads, not residential driveways. It was noted that nothing in the policy refers to drainage, yet that seems to be what the board is saying they are concerned about. Concerns were raised about this being akin to a zoning regulation without calling it such, and that a democratic process was needed where everyone decides what the regulations are. Other points addressed cost burdens on residents, and should the town have any say outside of the town right of way? In the end, it seemed that the board would table this policy at their next meeting, yet one concerned resident reported past discrimination and left the meeting questioning if this town was a safe place for them.

The proposed new conflict of interest policy gives more detail on what the recusal process is. Being a small town with extended family members it is inevitable that things will come up that appear to be a conflict. This new policy suggests how and when to recuse oneself, and how the board can act if a conflicted member did not recuse themselves.

The new delinquent tax policy clears up when a delinquent taxpayer must have a payment agreement, and what happens if there is no payment agreement, or if an agreement has not been met. Basically, it prevents people from ignoring a tax bill for a whole year, only paying up when they get a final notice.

As always, you can find the minutes at the town website: <https://www.athensvt.com/meetings.html>

- Sherry Maher

Grafton Library News

Smiles and Gratitude:

We extend heartfelt thanks for a special donation to the 2023 Grafton Public Library Annual Appeal in memory of Cathy Hallock. Cathy was an avid reader and supporter of children's literacy. She was our



collaborator for years, helping to organize Baby Book Bags for newborns in a joint project between Grafton Cares and the library. She will be greatly missed by our community and we send condolences to her family.

We would like to honor and recognize long-time library volunteer David Ross. Dave will be retiring from his gig at the library next month, as he and Judy are relocating. We owe David many thanks and much gratitude for the myriad ways he has extended his time, talents and good will to the library over the years and we wish the Ross family much happiness in their new home.

Programs @ Your Library

The librarian will be on an extended leave in mid-March through early April recovering from knee surgery. The library will be open for business as usual with a few changes. While making requests for materials via email, please note that there will be some delay in processing. If you want to expedite your requests while I'm out, please stop by or call the library to place your requests directly with a library volunteer. I will check email, but not as frequently as usual. There will be no Spanish in March and no Neighbor-to-Neighbor Lecture series scheduled. The Nature & Books Discussion Series will take place in March on Zoom.

Looking ahead, our next Neighbor to Neighbor Lecture series is scheduled for late April. Multi-instrumentalist Harry Hudson will present Intimacy of the Acoustic Guitar. Harry will offer a tour of acoustic musical styles and histories of the rare guitars from his collection, as they were meant to be played then and now. Nominated for the Nashville Musician's Registry, Harry has performed solo on tv and radio and shared stages with Hall of Famers, preferring all the while just to play on his couch for his dog, Rothko. Dogs are invited with their owners to this intimate performance of original music, but we ask for pre-registration for both canines and their humans.

Library Programming

Nature & Books Discussion Series: Wednesday, March 27, 6-7:30 on Zoom, Bicycling with Butterflies by Sara Dykman

Neighbor to Neighbor Lecture Series: Sunday, April 28, 2-3:30 pm Intimacy of the Acoustic Guitar with Harry Hudson

No Spanish in March.

- Michelle Dufort

Grace Cottage Events

1st Annual Make Tracks for Health - Enjoy the beauty and joy of winter, while helping Grace Cottage Family Health & Hospital in its mission to provide vital healthcare to our communities. Grace Cottage will host its first annual Snowshoe/ Cross-Country Ski event at the Nordic Center at Stratton Resort on Saturday, March 2, from 1-3 p.m.

Participants can choose to either snowshoe or cross-country ski on the Nordic Center's beautifully groomed trails. Registration is \$30 and rental equipment is available for an additional charge by advance registration.

Afterward, reward yourself with Grace Cottage-supplied treats by the fire! It's sure to be a fun time for the whole family!

And spring is just around the corner, so mark your calendar now for the **15th Annual Grace Cottage Family Health & Hospital's Spring into Health 5K**. The event begins with an 8:30 am shotgun start on Saturday, May 11, on the Townshend Common. You can run, walk, roll, stroll, or push your baby carriage for this fun, family-friendly event!

Registration is \$20 per participant (children under the age of 18 are free with signed parent/guardian permission) and registration is open now at gracecottage.org/events. A virtual option is also available. Register at the same link.

For more information or to sign up for these events, visit gracecottage.org/events, call 802-365-9109 or email info@gracecottage.org. - *CJ King GPC (she/her)*

Free lunch for Veterans

Senior Solutions has received an exciting grant from the Vermont Community Foundation to help provide a free monthly lunch for Veterans.

The program in Windham County is being held at the American legion #5 in Brattleboro on the second Monday of each month. Simply identify as a veteran and you receive your meal free. Our first event is on March 11th. No RSVP is needed. Just show up, bring your friends and order lunch! - *Joanne Erenhouse*

Animal Tracking Walk with Martha Mitchell

Saturday, March 9, 10 a.m.-noon

Join us for an animal tracking walk on Saturday, March 9, led by naturalist Martha Mitchell! Please RSVP to coordinator@windmillhillpinnacle.org. Wear sturdy shoes and meet at the Congregational Church of Westminster West, 44 Church Street, at 10 a.m.

If snow or soil conditions are not ideal for tracks, Martha will discuss other animal signs and how soils, geology, and vegetation all affect wildlife populations. Use this link to learn more about Windmill Hill Pinnacle Association www.windmillhillpinnacle.org.

A Town Creates A Fire Department

The Grafton Fire Department was formally established at the March 4, 1924 Town Meeting 100 years ago almost to the day of this year's Town Meeting. The Grafton Improvement Association had appointed a committee the previous September to organize a fire company. Once approved by the voters a dance was soon held in the Town Hall with admission being one pail to be used by the new Grafton Volunteer Fire Company. Why pails? The answer being that there was already a hand drawn and hand operated pumper for which water was supplied by a classic "bucket brigade" lifelong resident Norris Bragg recalled from his younger days in a 1984 interview. This pumper, now on display at the Historical Society, may have been in town since it was built in Windsor, Vermont in the shop of John Cooper between 1827-33. There are written references to some type of firefighting group in the Village since 1847 and possibly earlier but no formal continuing organization until the 1924 Town Meeting. Things moved quickly after the donation of 24 pails from the dance. Use this link to read the full history:

https://drive.google.com/file/d/18DJOtDCCrAHJDfD_BSSZNosiYSDmLdOF/view?usp=drive_link.

One constant that has existed throughout these past 100 years is the support provided to the Fire Department by the community. Organizations, Town Meeting, and many individuals, particularly those who have served as firefighters and Association members, created and maintained the Grafton Fire Department from 1924 to 2024. Fundraising events such as the Auxiliary Tag Sale and an annual appeal are a large part of the Fire Department's funding to supplement the Town Meeting allocation. It is this commitment to and by the community which will carry the volunteer Fire Department in Grafton into the next 100 years. Lastly, I'm hoping throughout this anniversary year to share highlights of the people, incidents, and other interesting bits from the 100 year history of the Grafton Fire Department. I'll be borrowing freely from Francis Palmer's 1954 Grafton History, the Historical Society's history "Five Dollars and a Jug of Rum", Town Reports, and the Grafton News as I do so. If you're not already following Grafton Fire and Rescue on Facebook you may want to in order to find additional historical posts and updates on current happenings.

Emergency responses from January 25 – February 23:

4 medical by Grafton Rescue.

- Dave Ross

Bull Creek Common Lands is Looking for a Few New Board Members

It's exciting times in the land conservation space! With planning underway to implement Vermont's Act 59, the Community Resilience and Biodiversity Protection Law, that signs on to the global initiative to conserve 30% of land by 2030 and 50% by 2050, it's a great time to get involved on a community scale to protect the land you love and have a climate-positive impact.

Founded in 2021, Bull Creek Common Lands' first project was the Raymond Bemis Community Forest in Athens, which opened to the public in August 2023. We are now expanding our board and looking for people of diverse backgrounds who would like to work with us to protect our local lands for public use, biodiversity, climate resilience, carbon storage and their innate, undeveloped value. BCCL is also collaborating with three other southern Vermont conservation organizations to build capacity across all of Windham County.

We are currently an all volunteer organization with a working board. The time investment is expected to be around 4-5 hours a month. We'd love to hear what you think you can offer and what you'd like to learn. If this opportunity sounds like something you'd like to discuss further, please email us to introduce yourself and make a plan to meet with current board members for a walk or cup of tea (hello@bullcreekcommonlands.org).

- The BCCL board of directors: Andy Toepfer, Hannah Regier, Debra Clarke and Candace Jensen

Get Newsletters from Rep. Chase

Our State House Representative Heather Chase will be at our Town Meeting Monday night. She also sends out a periodic newsletter to help keep her constituents up to date on some of the activities she has been involved in during the legislative session at the State House in Montpelier.

Recently one of her committees heard testimony on the Film and Creative Media Workforce Development Initiative All agreed that this growth industry could have a positive impact on our Vermont economy.

Better Places, a community matching grant program that empowers Vermonters to create inclusive and vibrant public places for projects throughout the state,



spoke to her Committee about the funding opportunities to upgrade local buildings. Let's ask her more about that at Town Meeting, where I'm sure we'll also hear more about efforts to issues that may have inadvertently caused unintended rate increases for property taxes.

You can reach her by phone at 802 875 4663, or request to get her newsletter at hchase@leg.state.vt.us.

- Representative Heather Chase

Reed Road Weather Summary for February

This month saw a continuation of our unusual Jan. weather as we all keep asking, "What is going on this year?" Both temperatures and precipitation have been abnormal, resulting in low snowfall and warmer conditions. Although we did get hit with a short frigid period mid-month, the thermometer still has not hit zero, so it has felt more like early April than February. Perhaps we will catch a break on mud season this year!

High temp.: 54.1 degrees

Low temp.: 3.9 degrees

Snowfall : approx.. 7" with some rainy spells interspersed

- Treah Pichette

Thoughts to Ponder in March

"March is a tomboy with tousled hair, a mischievous smile, mud on her shoes, and a laugh in her voice."

- Hal Borland

"March is unpredictable like life, you never know when the sun will be smiling from the clouds. Unknown

"Never iron a four leaf clover, because you don't want to press your luck"

- Irish Proverb

COMMUNITY INFORMATION

Select Board Meetings: 3rd Thursday 7:00 PM

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

Planning Commission: 2nd Tuesday 10:30 AM

Meeting House Committee: 2nd Monday 10:00 AM

School Board: 2nd Thursday 6:00 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.



TRASH PICK-UP: MARCH 18

RECYCLE PICK-UP: MARCH 4

Charles Perham Journal February 1873

- 1 Have been to Saxtons River to the Mill. Paid into the town treasurer \$91.36. \$23.36 to go into the old receipt. \$65.00 on the new. Received letter from Edward Hall Westminster. Collected of Ober Davis today.
- 2 To home all day. A very cold day. The old mare came home. At night went and drove her back.
- 3 Have finished drawing the school house wood with Jim(his horse). Carried down some boards to George Eager make a box to put feed in. A very cold day. In the evening wrote a letter to Isaac Hudson East Newark VT
- 4 Have been down to the selectman meet to make out orders. Get my order of \$20.00 for collecting taxes. Paid into the town treasure \$40.00. Elizabeth went down to Merrills. Brought home the feed box from George Eagers. Called and Collected Herbert Clarks taxes of Mary Clark \$18.74. Received the receipt from the State Treasure Montpelier.
- 5 Have been to Grafton to the probate court. Had to pay Judge Stadder for his services \$6.30. Got my letter of Administrator from the judge today. Amos Ball signed the bond with me. Got a Barrell of flower from Mr Barrett for \$9.50 did not pay. The name was Quaker Mills. James Eager has sawed wood and done the chores today. Paid him \$1.00.
- 6 Have been to Saxtons River to the Mill today. Paid for grinding .42. Sent letter to the auditor of accounts Montpelier. Settled all up with the town what was due.
- 7 Have been splitting and sawing wood all day. A very pleasant day.
- 8 Piled wood in the forenoon. In the afternoon went down to the town Clerks office for Abatement of taxes. Have abated: Keefe 18.47, Cobleigh 7.28, Ball 4.25, Whitney 3.14, Smith 2.26.
- 9 Have been to Meeting with Elizabeth.
- 10 To Home all day a very cold day. Frank Oaks here to pay taxes. Worked on chairs some. Commenced to fed hay out of the South side of the bay tonight.
- 11 In the afternoon went Saxtons River after some meal. It came to \$7.75. Elizabeth received a letter from her sister Carista from Grafton.
12. Carried mother down to Merrills. Then went and collected taxes in the west part of town. Called to Ball, Whitney, Davis, Bridges, Marsh, Austin, Nial Bemis, James Brown, Keefe and Wells. Mrs. Whitney here today.
- 13 In the forenoon sawed wood. In the afternoon went down to Cambrideport, carried 33 chair sets. Brought mother home from Merrills today. Brought home three bushels of corn at .70 cents a bushel. Paid to the town treasurer \$153.44
- 14 Have been to carry Elizabeth up to Charles Whites to stay until Wednesday of next week. Have hired today Charles Wyman for 19 dollars a month for six months and 16 dollars for the seventh month if he continues to work. To commence the first of April next. James Eager here in the evening to get me to get flour for him.
- 15 Lennie brought Aunt Nancy here today. Have been up on the hill and drawn down with the oxen 3 hitches of Hemlock for the sheep. Split and piled wood some.
- 16 It has been snowing most all day. In the evening wrote to ---- Windsor the news of this town and of Brookline.
- 17 Have been and carried Aunt Nancy down to Merrills. In the evening went down to Eagers to see about the old mare. Had my hair cut. Called to Smiths.
- 18 Broke out the road between here and Mr. Whitneys with the oxen in the forenoon. In the afternoon went down to Mr. Ranneys and post office. Called to Dustin Balls to see Aunt Phebe.
- 19 Have been up to Grafton after Elizabeth. To Charles Whites to dinner. Paid Barrett for Barrel of flower 9.50 received for eggs .36. Paid for one pair of drawers \$1.00.
- 20 Have been over to Mr. Cobbs today about keeping his sheep. There for dinner. Came home by way of the Falls. Brought home 48 chair splints. Sent twenty office chairs by way of the Stage.
- 21 It has been snowing all day. Worked on chairs James Eager here.
- 22 Worked on chairs today. The wind has blown hard all day and we are drifting up badly. It seems as though warm months will never come.
- 23 To home all day and well as may be for it has drifted so badly we can not get far if we try. Have shoveled some but there is not much use in shoveling as the wind continues to blow.
- 24 Have been shoveling snow all day with: Edwards, Smith, Eager, Hudson, Whitney. The wind is hard tonight.
- 25 Worked on chairs today. The wind is blowing and drifting all up today.
- 26 Shoveled snow in the forenoon to get down to Mr. Whitneys. Just night went with Elizabeth down to our Meeting House for a Dramatic Festivity paid out .80 cents.
- 28 Have been to Saxtons River to the Mill.