

Municipal Corner – January

Library: The temporary library is now open in the Akeley Building Memorial Room. There are some public access computers, periodicals, children’s books and limited adult collection items available. The hours of operation are Monday through Friday 10am to 4pm and Saturday from 10am to 2pm.

Future Budget Pressures: The Town of Stowe is fortunate to have a growing tax base both in terms of real property and local option taxes to help offset future tax pressure. With that being said, the Town will continue to face pressure to manage the municipal tax rate of growth. There are several reasons for this.

Volunteerism for first responders continues to diminish not only in Stowe, but throughout Vermont and America. In addition to the decline of volunteers, the Town of Stowe Fire Department senior officers have indicated they are planning on retiring after years of service, leaving a senior leadership vacuum. As our leadership team retires and volunteerism declines, they must be infilled with trained paid employees to provide surety of service. This will be a major fiscal and service challenge for Stowe and the rest of rural Vermont over the next decade.

Municipalities continue to face an increasing onslaught of Federal and State regulations, such as increased storm water regulations. Another example is increased police training requirements. When an officer is gone to off-site training, we have need to fill their shift for coverage purposes creating overtime. While the goal of some of these regulations are laudable and necessary, it often doesn’t come with offsetting revenue sharing to cover the cost.

I once read a Vermont Life article from decades ago that said, “Vermonters survive through a lack of want.” We are well past that. The Selectboard and I receive constant requests to expand and/or improve our infrastructure and services. Some of this is due to worn out infrastructure and others is due to increased expectations of what the municipality should provide. Also, as the Federal and State governments try to hold the line on their budgets or reduce cost, it puts pressure on municipalities to infill. Town leaders and citizens will have to think about what we our core responsibilities are, what should be provided at the local level due to our ability to best provide the service, and what we are uniquely positioned to add value to that you desire your local government to provide. Also, what other areas are strategic to invest local tax dollars in for the future of Stowe.

Stowe may not be growing significantly in terms of year-round population, but the growth of the numbers of people using it, increasing regulatory requirements, and expectations are causing towns to make improvements to its infrastructure. An example of this is paving the River Road. The Town already spends over \$400,000 per year trying to keep up with the paving requirements of our existing paved roads, but as more people use River Road it puts pressure on the Town to pave it because it takes more and more to maintain it as a gravel road. Also, the road is “hydrologically-connected” as it relates to new stormwater regulations and it may be necessary to do for compliance. . Finally, there is the increased expectation that the roads meet a higher standard. So why haven’t we paved the road yet? Because it is estimated to cost over one million dollars to do so.

Capital Projects: The Town has undertaken several capital projects over the last decade to replace buildings, sidewalks and other infrastructure that has outlived its useful life cycle. Stowe has also extended it sidewalk network to accommodate pedestrians up the Mountain Road and will be this

spring within the Lower Village. My understanding is that Stowe historically resisted traffic lights and other infrastructure improvements for aesthetic reasons, but as a former Selectboard member said to me the other day, *Stowe has reached a tipping point*. The Town has also taken on improvements with our water and sewer utilities to meet increasing demand and provide surety of service. An example of this is the installation of a second well at *Village Green* for redundancy purposes and emergency generators at this location and the Edson Hill well. When the October 2017 wind storm left parts of the Town without power for several days, Stowe almost ran out of potable public drinking water. Our after-action review made it a top priority to undertake improvements to minimize this risk in the future. Stowe may have the appearance of a small Vermont town due to excellent land use planning, but Stowe is really equivalent to a small Vermont city in terms of the scale of its infrastructure, its economy, the number of residents and guest visits each day, and its economic importance.

In terms of future major capital projects, the Memorial Park Master Plan calls for a new recreation center to replace the Gale Center which has outlived its useful life. This will cost over \$1 million to replace. The electorate voted to replace its Class 1 sidewalks; but will still need to replace the remainder of the sidewalks on the side streets over time and extend the sidewalk on the Mountain Road up to Cottage Club Road. This will cost over \$2 million dollars. The Helen Day Art Center, Ski Museum and Akeley Buildings HVAC systems are tired and old. We have budgeted \$40,000 in next year's operating budget to hire a mechanical engineer to help us come up with a plan to efficiently and reliably meet these buildings needs going forward. The State is planning on installing a traffic signal at the West Hill / Rt. 100 Intersection in 2020. The Town has chosen a traffic light as the preferred alternative at the Luce Hill / Rt. 108 intersection (\$1.5 million) and a roundabout at the Moscow Road / Rt. 100 intersection (\$2.2 million). These projects are on State highways and are eligible for Federal / State revenue; but are not currently high priorities for them in comparison with other projects throughout the state that are higher accident locations. If the Town wants to advance them sooner, it may have to fund them locally. In addition, we are assessing what it will take to comply with storm water regulations. Finally, the Town recently spent over one million dollars to stabilize the bank along the West Branch that abuts the Recreation Path. At Annual Meeting the Selectboard plans on asking the voters for \$285,000 to do the same between Bridge #1 and #2 on the Rec Path. The West Branch and Little River are very active and their banks subject to erosion. This is not an exhaustive list and there are things that will come at us that we haven't even begun to contemplate.

Can we meet the challenge? Yes, if we continue good land use planning, don't try to do everything at once and take it one step at a time, community minded citizens run for elective office and volunteer to serve in various appointed local government positions, citizens vote, and we are civil with one another. Stowe has a lot going for it. It is our responsibility to take care of her and continue moving her in a positive direction. Together, we can.