

The REPORTER

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Vol. 26, No. 51

Wednesday, December 22, 2021

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RNESU board approves budget hike of 2.75%

Discusses bus
Driver shortage,
COVID burnout

BY ANGELO LYNN

BRANDON — At their regular meeting last Wednesday, Dec. 15, the RNESU board met for an hour to discuss the current shortage of bus drivers, the continuing effect of the pandemic on the school district, the proposed bud-

get, and heard an update on the ongoing superintendent search.

Superintendent Jeanne Collins briefed the board on the extensive efforts the board is taking to try to ease the shortage of bus drivers throughout the district. She noted the district is advertising for help in the area newspapers, in social media and digital venues, and that the district was still facing shortages. She also said

(See RNESU board, Page 16)

Superintendent Search committee sets first public forum for Jan. 6

BY ANGELO LYNN

BRANDON — Following the recent announcement by RNESU Superintendent Jeanne Collins that she would step down at the end of the current school year in June 2022, the RNESU school board has formed a search committee and are already “well underway,”

according to board chair Laurie Bertrand.

At their first meeting on Dec. 13, the committee hired a search consultant through the Vermont School Board’s Association, Elaine Pinckney, with the goal of finding a candidate before Town Meeting, Bertrand

(See Superintendent, Page 16)

Brandon Area Rescue appeals to towns for emergency aid

BY ANGELO LYNN

BRANDON — After decades of taking care of Brandon-area residents when emergency attention was needed, the Brandon Area Rescue Squad is now appealing to the community for an emergency of its own.

Jordan Stage, BARS chief

operations officer, recently reached out to the four towns it principally serves — Brandon, Leicester, Goshen and Sudbury — for additional aid as its traditional revenue sources are not keeping up with the ambulance service’s costs.

(See Brandon Rescue, Page 22)

OV, Proctor, Westside winter sports teams kick-off the season

BY ANDY KIRKALDY &
ANGELO LYNN

BRANDON — The COVID-shortened winter of the 2020-21 high school sports season is behind us, and the teams at Otter Valley are happy about that. The pandemic forced the school’s basketball programs, like those

elsewhere, to play abbreviated seasons, and wrestling was sidelined for the entire season.

And after a year off, the Otter wrestling team looks to be back and very strong with enough grapplers to fill the entire lineup and then some. The basketball teams — the girls’ squad has a

new but familiar coach — will try to play up their strengths this year. And the Nordic ski team is young but learning fast.

Unless the pandemic worsens and state officials curtail the season, OV athletes in the preseason were looking forward to enjoying full schedules (with masks for all,

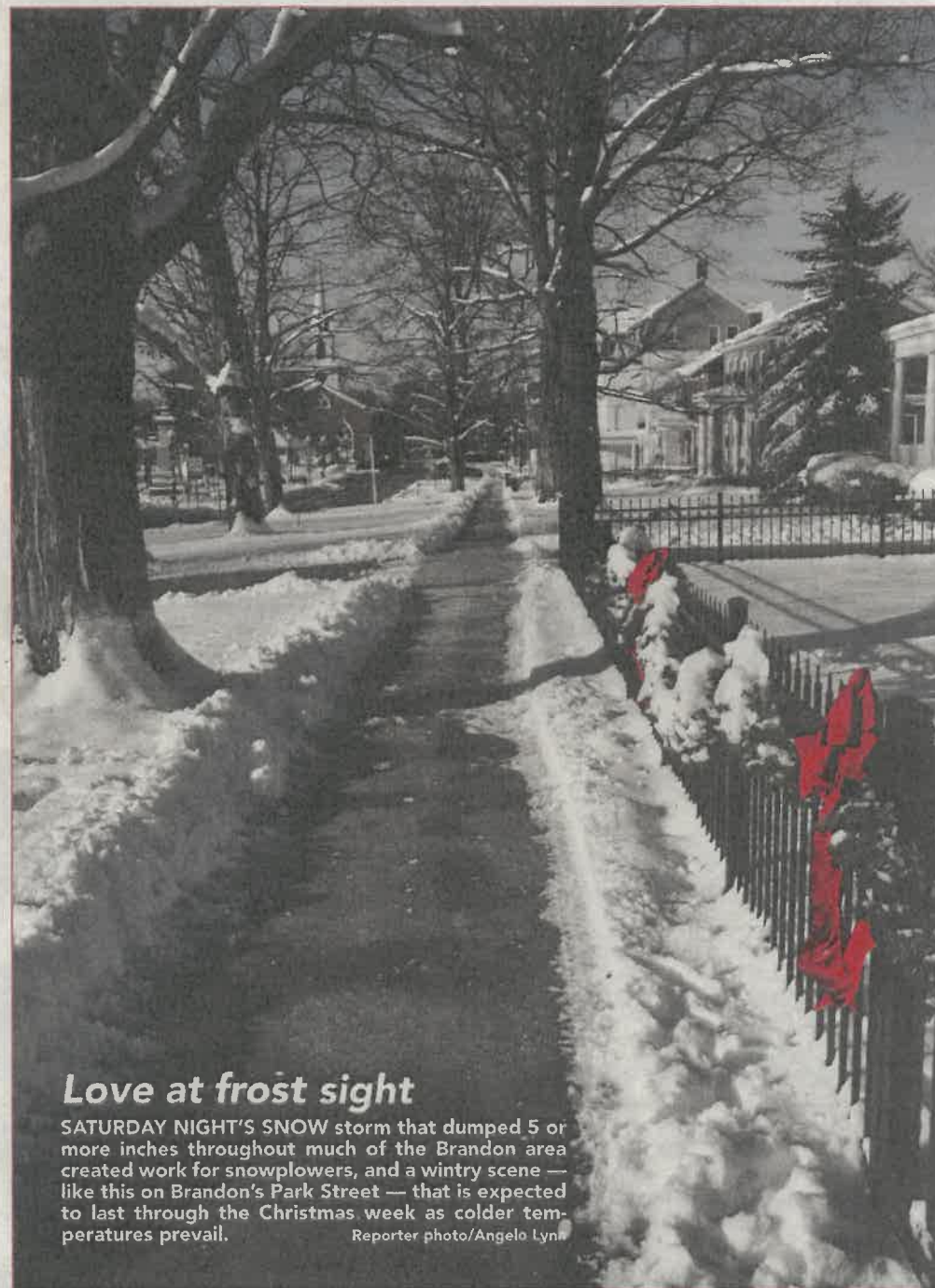
except wrestlers while on mats), and they and their coaches were feeling hopeful.

BOYS’ BASKETBALL

Coach Mike Stark was feeling optimistic about his Otter boys’ basketball team during the preseason because of what he saw as its balance and depth.

“One through 11 they’re all pretty similar in their talent level, so I think contributions from the bench are going to be huge this

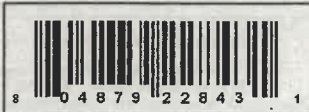
(See Sports Report, Page 10)



Love at frost sight

SATURDAY NIGHT’S SNOW storm that dumped 5 or more inches throughout much of the Brandon area created work for snowplowers, and a wintry scene — like this on Brandon’s Park Street — that is expected to last through the Christmas week as colder temperatures prevail.

Reporter photo/Angelo Lynn



RNEUS board

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an important avenue could be word-of-mouth advertising and wanted the community to know that the district was offering to pay for training and licensing of drivers, and that there are opportunities to combine the two part-time daily activities of a typical driver (early morning driver to school and after school, with other part-time school positions (such as custodial) into a full-time job position that could offer benefits.

The administration will keep its focus on trying to recruit new bus drivers and encourages the school community to help spread word of the job opportunities.

In its discussion of the proposed district-wide budget for FY 2022, the board approved a proposed budget of \$10,733,367, which represents a budget increase of 2.75%. District wide property assessments were up 9.45%, however, which could likely mean the tax rates will remain somewhat stable. A budget surplus of \$170,000, which is typical, will be carried over.

COVID BURNOUT

In comments related to the COVID 19 pandemic, Collins noted that the entire community needed a break from the constant strain, but that the current resurgence means that is unlikely. "People are tired," she said, but encouraged everyone to remain vigilant through the next wave of the omicron variant and this winter's surge of the Delta variant — both of which are expected to hit Vermont and the Northeast now and through the early part of

the winter.

Collins noted that the entire second grade at Neshobe Elementary School had been quarantined. In later news last Friday, Collins made the decision to go to remote learning at Neshobe through school break. (See related story.)

WHITING CHILDCARE

Collins also described the Whiting Childcare Partnership Program, to the board, noting that 20 students were enrolled as of Oct. 1, 2021. The program can host two classes of 16 students each in what she described as a "unique learning/daycare environment." Eleven students attend the program from outside the district, she said, adding that there was demand for a similar program to be located in the southern part of the district.

In other news, Bertrand presented an update of the superintendent's search, saying it was "well underway" and had hopes of completing the search before Town Meeting. (See related story in this issue.) She noted that the search committee consisted of six RNESU board members, a consultant, representatives from special services, finance, technology, a principal, a teacher and Melinda Piper, secretary of the superintendent's office.

As a final action, the board approved an additional 50% increase in the board chair's compensation, raising it to a total of \$900 per year, for the large number of hours the board chair puts into that position.

Note: Gene DeLorenzo contributed to this report.

Covid prompts remote learning mandate at Neshobe

BRANDON — A surge of Covid-19 cases within Neshobe Elementary School forced RNESU Supt. Jeanne Collins to move the entire school to remote learning as of last Friday, Dec. 17 and to keep that in place until the December break this Wednesday.

In a statement posted on the school's website last Thursday evening, Collins said it was a tough choice to make but considered it a "last choice option."

"Since we are not able to get ahead of the positive cases, we have made the very difficult decision to go to distance learning starting tomorrow (Friday, Dec. 17) until the December

break," read the statement.

Collins cited two main factors that prompted the action: a cluster of positive cases that affected a number of grade levels and sent at least six classes into quarantine; and a shortage of staff.

Collins said Neshobe had 22 staff absences in a single day earlier last week and could not enough substitutes to fill those positions.

"For consistency of education, it made sense to move to distance learning so that all kids would be able to complete these next four days," she said. Classes go through Wednesday of this week.

Made you look!

THIS SCARECROW FOUND dangling from the roof of a home in Brandon sure does it's job.

Photo by Angelo Lynn



Superintendent

(Continued from Page 1)

said.

"Based on the high caliber of leaders we've had in the past, we're looking for a new leader to follow in their footsteps and, perhaps most importantly, be an innovative leader. We're looking for someone who is forward looking to take these schools into the future in the bold ways that we need to be proceeding, and also be able to make good, quick decisions to handle the crises of the day — like Jeanne has with this pandemic, and as she did in meeting the consolidation and merger challenges under Act 46."

"Because Jeanne has built up such a good team around her, we're in really good shape and should be a very desirable school district to manage," Bertrand said.

She also noted that the search committee and the district board wanted to involve district residents in the search process as much as possible. To that end, Bertrand said the committee would be putting out "thought exchanges" on the school dis-

trict's website to allow residents to reach out to the committee with thoughts, recommendations or questions; and would host a PEG TV broadcast in which the search process will be discussed between Bertrand and Pinckney.

A special page on the district's website will be devoted to the search for a new superintendent with ways the community can be involved. A meet and greet with the finalists will hopefully be set in February, Bertrand said.

Members on the search committee are: Lead group with voting power: RNESU board members, comprised of Laurie Bertrand, Becky Bertrand, Barbara Ebling, Brenda Hummel, Jacob Powsner, and Jessica Quesnel.

The extended team taps the Central Office personnel and includes: Brenda Fleming, director of business and finance; Melinda Piper, executive secretary to the superintendent; Kristin Hubert, director of Curriculum, Instruction and Assessment; Marsha Bruce, director of special services; and Alexis Blake, director of technology. Also, Lathrop

Principal Debbie Alexander and one teacher from Barstow.

When asked what other qualities they are looking for in a superintendent, Bertrand was quick to add "being a good communicator with district residents. Jeanne has done an excellent job keeping district parents and residents informed about what's going on and explaining the reasons behind our actions. Making sure parents have the information they need is key, and we want that to continue," she said. And, of course, she added, "making sure the district runs effectively and efficiency and being able to pivot with things like the pandemic."

A virtual public forum on the search process, which is also a forum seeking public input on what traits residents most want to see in the candidates, will be held on January 6 from 6-7 p.m. A committee meeting will follow. More information can be found about the search committee process by going to <https://tinyurl.com/2p8jukch>.