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Wednesday, January 12, 2022

Brandon budget and taxes go down, new police chief hired

BY ANGELO LYNN

BRANDON — After a 17-minute meeting in early December, and a skipped meeting just before the Christmas holiday, the Brandon Selectboard held a 90-plus minute meeting Monday, Jan. 10, at which they announced the hiring of a new police chief, established the proposed budgets and revisited prior discussions on the town's noise ordinance and whether to mail out town ballots ahead of the annual meeting on Feb. 28 and Town Meeting on March 1.

In a brief report by Town Manager Dave Atherton, he informed

the board that their search for a police chief had gone much better than they could have expected — interviewing several highly qualified candidates — and that resulted in the hiring of David Kachajian, 49, who has been a lieutenant with the Swanton (Vermont) police force. He began work as Brandon's new police chief on Tuesday, Jan. 11. Former Brandon Police Chief Christopher Brickell had given notice in late November and served his last day on Dec. 18.

To conduct a search and find an "exemplary" candidate in a month's time was "exceptional," Atherton

said during a follow-up interview. Atherton noted that the police department also saw its lieutenant retire at the end of the year, but the quick hiring of the police chief, the three policeman on staff and two more coming back to the force in late February or early March from the police academy, should have the force back to full strength in the near future.

"I'm feeling more positive with the police department because we got so many good applicants," Atherton told the board. "We're on the path for rebuilding our town (after the Segment 6 construction project) and I think it's making a big difference. Brandon has got to be doing something right because we attracted a lot of great applicants, and a lot of them referenced the investment residents had made in the community. I'm feeling real positive about our ability to recruit top candidates in the future."

BUDGET, TAX DECREASES

In unusual news about the town budget, board Chairman Seth Hopkins reviewed with selectboard members a proposed budget that saw a small decrease in the General Fund budget and a fairly significant (See Brandon selectboard, Page 8)

New chief sets high goals



DAVID KACHAJIAN

BRANDON — After 29 years in police work, David Kachajian has achieved one of his career goals: serving as police chief for a town he wants to call home.

Prior to this week, he had served as Lieutenant at the Swanton Police Department, but Tuesday, Jan. 11, was his first day on the job as Brandon's Chief of Police.

While excited, his first reaction has been to get down to business to accomplish another lofty marker. "My goal," Kachajian said, "is to see how we can make this the best police department in the state. That's the goal; (See David Kachajian, Page 11)

OVUU eyes candidate for principal, sees budget hike

BY GENE DELORENZO

BRANDON - At its January 5 meeting, the Otter Valley Unified Union School Board offered the principal post to Michael Ruppel of Springfield, Vt. Mr. Ruppel is currently the assistant principal at Springfield High School. He was named a Roland Fellow in 2017 for his outstanding work in education. More details will follow should he accept the offer. His anticipated start date would be July 1.

In other actions taken into consideration at Wednesday's meeting, the board discussed potential time limits placed on public spoken presentations at meetings, considered the amount of involvement in the governance process by administrators, and reviewed the proposed budget for the fiscal year 2023.

The proposed budget for the fiscal year 2023 as presented showed a 7.87% increase from 2022. The (See OVUU School board, Page 8)

Pittsford selectboard debates virtual Town Meeting this year

BY ARIADNE WILL

The current surge in COVID-19 cases led the Pittsford Selectboard to consider alternative ways to hold Town Meeting this year.

The selectboard discussed at their meeting Wednesday options for holding Town Meeting through Australian ballot or in person at a later date and outside. No conclusion was reached, in part due to a bill pending in the state legislature.

State Representative Butch Shaw told the selectboard that the bill — which is expected to pass later this week — will authorize towns to adopt either option.

Shaw said that the bill is similar to the bill that allowed towns to alter Town Meeting proceedings last year.

Selectmen also discussed alternatives for collecting ballots. Options discussed including finding funding to pay for mailing ballots and a possibility of a drive-around to collect them.

This year's Town Meeting warning was also approved by the panel.

In other business, the selectboard unanimously approved the adoption of the budgets for FY 2023.

In order to retain a balanced budget, Pittsford will forego line

striping again this year due to supply ages. The proposed paving budget compared back.

The General Fund will see tax increases. To John Haverstock meeting that the incomparable to inc considered by other

(See Pittsford,)



Small town splendor

THE VILLAGE OF Whiting sits serenely tucked in of Addison County farm country on a cold, w Tuesday when temperatures dipped to 10-belo morning and were forecast to drop even colder night.

Reporter photo/



tax rate for fiscal
Brandon' operating
130 represents a
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compared to last
— represents a

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that the select-
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Hopkins said.
s was partially the
Budget Advisory
d work to keep
Hopkins praised

the committee for its work, citing
members: Jan Coolidge, Barry Var-
ian, Peter Werner, Doug Bailey and
Neil Silins.

After reviewing the budget, the
selectboard approved it unanimous-
ly.

"It's quite an achievement," Hop-
kins concluded, "that in a time of in-
flation and employment pressures,
we can come in with a budget that
residents will appreciate (in terms
of low taxes) while still serving the
town well and meeting the commu-
nity's needs."

NOISE ORDINANCE

The board reviewed whether
to pose a nonbinding question to
voters about the town's noise or-
dinance. It was last April that the
board held an exhaustive month-
long community discussion on the
ordinance, which ended in the se-
lectboard voting 4-1 to stay with the
state ordinance rather than rewrite
one of their own.

In a 15-minute discussion Mon-
day night, the selectboard discussed
the pros and cons of putting a res-
olution at the bottom of the annual
meeting ballot. The first challenge
discussed was what the question
would be, because it has to be in the
form of a 'yes or no' answer. Fram-
ing any question in that context left
it vague (for example, Do you think
Brandon should draft a separate
noise ordinance? Or do you ap-
prove of Brandon's existing noise
ordinance?) and might yield a result
that was misleading or too vague to
be useful.

Others at the meeting countered
that because the question would
be nonbinding, any question posed
could yield valuable insights into
what town residents were thinking,
and therefore help the board make
more fully informed decisions later.

The discussion also noted that the

bases, while not creating potential
legal challenges.

In the end, the selectboard voted,
4-1, with Tim Guiles opposed, not
to pose a nonbinding resolution on
the town ballot.

Said Hopkins, "the board's 4-1
vote on April 12, 2021, was perhaps
one of the most deliberate things the
board has ever done, as it was the
end result of an extended and very
public process of letters, surveys,
hearings, and deliberation. The
broad consensus of the community
and of the board was/is that current
state statute is sufficient, and almost
any municipal ordinance about
noise would be highly difficult, if
not impossible, to enforce."

The state's statutes on noise are
scattered throughout the VSA in
various chapters, Hopkins said, but
a non-profit organization made an
effort at collating them here, which
can be found at <https://noisefree.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/12/vermont.pdf>.

TOWN MEETING VOTING

In a similar discussion, the se-
lectboard spent 15-plus minutes re-
visiting a board vote at its Oct. 25,
2021 meeting, in which they voted
4-1, with Tracy Wyman opposed,
to send out mail-in ballots to all eli-
gible town residents. At that same
meeting, they agreed to couple the
school district ballot with the town's
ballot, if all the other towns in the
district would also be mailing the

district are not going to be mailing
ballots, however, the Brandon se-
lectboard discussed whether their
prior decision would be confusing
to voters, and whether they should
rescind that decision.

After calling town clerk Sue
Gage, who joined the meeting in
progress via Zoom, for details about
the mail-in ballots — during which
they learned the cost was between
\$5,000-\$6,000 (to be taken out
of the town clerk's budget) — the
board eventually agreed to keep
their prior decision in place. That
means the town will send out town
ballots to eligible voters. Those
voters may send the ballot back by
mail, or bring it into the voting plac-
es on Town Meeting Day. Voting on
the district's school budgets will be
separate and have its own process.

Like last year, the board also
decided not to hold Town Meet-
ing in-person, but hold it virtually.
Residents will, however, be able to
come to a voting place to cast an
Australian ballot on the budgets and
specific issues.

OTHER BUSINESS

• The board unanimously ap-
proved an update to the personnel
policy benefits addendum. It was
noted that the benefits to full-time
eligible employees beyond wages/
salary include: health insurance
(town pays 85% of gold-level plan)
or buyout; life and disability in-
surance (100%); dental insurance

(health reimbursement arrangement
account); VMERS retirement sys-
tem contribution based on statutory
percentage of salary; trainings and
professional development; and uni-
form costs or allowance.

• The selectboard also heard from
Atherton that the town officially
received two grants: one for a new
and updated Local Hazard Mitiga-
tion Plan (LHMP) development
under the 2020 Building Resilient
Infrastructure and Communities
(BRIC) program through FEMA.
The grant is around \$4,000. The
other grant was funding for three
properties on Newton Road that
Atherton applied for through the
Vermont Emergency Management
Flood Resilient Communities Fund
(FRCF). That grant amount was for
\$481,918.50.

In comments after the meeting,
Hopkins made a point to emphasize
the amount of revenue the town re-
ceives each year from sources other
than taxation, and credited Ath-
erton for savings. "In times gone by
these would be kind of newsworthy
grants," Hopkins said. "But Dave
is so proactive in pursuing grants
for Brandon, so consistent in his
relationship-building with granting
authorities at the state level, and so
successful in being awarded grants,
that we sort of just expect him to
keep delivering for Brandon — and
he does."

OVUU school board

(Continued from Page 1)

amount to be spent in FY2021-2022
comes in at \$20,060,086, while
proposed expenditure for FY2022-
2023 is listed at \$21,696,910. In
the budget, revenue is projected to
increase by 2%, while spending per
student is anticipated to be \$17,236
compared to the current amount
of \$15,537. The state average is
\$18,023.

Addressing other issues, board
member Kevin Thornton opined
that the proposed two-minute limit
designated for people to speak at a
public forum "stinks" and called it a
"horrible idea" as he believes it is
contrary to the "Vermont tradition"
of public expression. He stressed
that there is a long tradition of "lis-
tening to constituents" and that the
two-minute limit is a "panic reac-
tion" by the State School Board
association, which has suggested
limiting public speaking at school
board meetings.

Board member Derek Larsen,
Brandon, disagreed and said the
limit would discourage "redundan-
cy" in public speaking. RNESU Su-
perintendent Jeanne Collins eventu-
ally suggested that the topic should
be "wordsmithed" and sent back for
further discussion and analysis.

Supt. Jeanne Collins reviewed

the district's governance policy in
light of her pending departure and
the installation of a new superinten-
dent. Collins noted the four broad
parts of the "governance policy"
are: global ends, executive limita-
tions, management and delegation,
and evaluation of the superinten-
dent.

The board launched into a
lengthy discussion regarding pro-
tocol surrounding the governance
policy and the "voice of the board,"
which elicited responses from
Bill Mathis, Kevin Thornton, and
Barbara Ebling. That discussion
centered around management and
delegation and evaluation of the su-
perintendent.


Mathis said the board needed to
show flexibility and not be overly
rigid, that the concept of a central-
ization of power needed watching
by the board and others, and that
the phrase "reasonable interpreta-
tion" (when viewed in terms of
what the superintendent can/can-
not do) is potentially dangerous. He
also noted that the ability to modify
policies needed to be a part of the
overall package on an ongoing ba-
sis. Thornton echoed the thoughts
of Mr. Mathis, as regards policies
being very difficult to amend and

that he believed the board has "no
say" in the hiring process of a new
superintendent.

Ebling countered his thoughts by
saying there were avenues within
the policy procedures for board
members and citizens to have input
surrounding the hiring process for a
new superintendent. She feels that
the constituents are "encouraged to
be involved" and should be.

Board chair Laurie Bertrand
thanked the members for their in-
put and reaffirmed the consensus
belief that Supt. Collins has done a
fine job as superintendent and that
the community "thanks her for her
efforts."

Collins concluded the meeting
by saying she was concerned about
the impact of COVID-19, Omi-
cron variant, on Otter Valley High
School and the State of Vermont.
She cited "upwards of 30 cases" of
the disease at OVUHS on Tuesday,
January 4. She also mentioned the
absence of 50% of the school cus-
todians, along with two bus drivers.
Finally, she praised the "incredible
patience" of OVUHS parents, staff
members, faculty, and others during
this challenging time.



READER COMMENTS

A subscriber from Brandon writes:
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about happenings in town
and around the area —
thanks!"**

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