

11/5/2020

It's been raining in Falls Village and we've had a little wet snow, a harbinger of the winter to come. The beautiful fall weather we have had as well the magnificent foliage season are coming to a close. The rain has been a blessing as it is helping to offset the precipitation deficit in our area.

Unfortunately, our winning streak against the Covid-19 virus was broken with our first reported case last week. Up to that point, we were the only village, town or city in the state without an incidence. When you watch the news hear it on the radio or read it in the paper, you know that the number of infections has accelerated nationally and regionally. Consequently, please be kind to your neighbors and friends by wearing a mask in public, social distance yourself, wash your hands and follow all the protocols suggested by the Connecticut Department of Health and the Center for Disease Control.

In this regard, we have returned to a 'lockdown' status at Town Hall. If you need help with anything, we'll still be here to assist you. Knock on the door or give us a call to make an appointment. Masks are required and we have a sign-in sheet if you need to come in so that we can do contact tracing if necessary.

Like almost every town in the United States, we are gearing up for the election. We have received a record number (for our village) of absentee ballots. We assure you that we have prepared extensively for this and expect no voting problems in Falls Village.

Our sale of the water company is proceeding through the PURA regulatory process. PURA (Public Utilities Regulatory Authority) has stringent requirements in place to oversee sales of a public utility. While this process may seem to be onerous and generating too much paper, it is done to protect all parties in a transaction of this type. We expect that we will have final PURA approval in March of 2021 and can then finalize the sale.

As you might have noticed on Facebook, there have been several car break-ins when parked at homes around the village. Please keep your cars locked at night. This will help us prevent these problems.

The Town of Canaan Planning and Zoning Commission held three public hearings on the application of the Falls Village Housing Trust to construct some affordable rental units in our town and approved their site plan last Thursday night with several conditions that must be met. The next step is to drill wells to make sure that the water on the site is sufficient. After that is done, the state would have to finance the project before construction can begin.

Eversource has been into to see us at Town Hall to explain their new procedures for working with us in a storm such as the one that we just had. While they admit things didn't go as well as they should, (a gross understatement), they have pledged to do better with their new system in the future. PURA made them do it by order but, to their credit, they did come through with a credible plan for the future. How well they implement it will be a question to be answered at a later date.

Our new website changes have been delayed for a time. We still hope to have it up and running quickly. All the data exchange should be done but there were a few glitches that we have found. I'll make sure and let you know when the changeover is complete.

Many people in the town have asked when the gas station will be open. They have gas and the only thing that is preventing them from selling it is that the state has requested an A-2 survey of the property. As soon as that is complete, which should this week, and is submitted, they should have the ability to open. Ironically, the property is surrounded by three state roads which should have made the boundaries pretty apparent to anyone. Yet, rules are rules. Hopefully, this will be the last stumbling block preventing sales of gas in our town.

Activity has been progressing on the vacant space at 107 Main Street. Volunteers have cleaned the space, taken down partitions erected by the previous tenant and are painting the walls. Our kudos to those who have donated time to make this progress possible. Some work may have to be done by contractors but we will cross that bridge when we come to it. Certainly, the façade will have to be repainted but that will have to await the passing of winter. We believe we will find attractive uses for the building in the near future as interest in the space is developing through community efforts.

We are constantly looking for people to populate our Boards and Commissions. If you would like to participate in our town government, we encourage you to contact me or anyone at Town Hall. You will find that your contributions will be rewarding for both yourself and the village. While issues come up that are controversial, they are the exception. But all of us benefit when citizen involvement increases. Specifically, we are looking for people to join the Recreation Commission as Darin Dodge accepted a job in West Virginia and Nick Boyden also put in his resignation.

During the past decade, we have had several comments from the state about the condition of our bridges. Recently, we had Cardinal Engineering do a more detailed study of the many bridges we have in town. The Board of Selectmen have formed an advisory group to help us develop a long-term plan to address these issues. While one of our bridges most likely will need to be replaced, we can do maintenance on the others over a 5 to 7-year period to extend the expected life of the remaining ones for a decade or more. Some of this can be done by our town

crew. The members of the advisory group are members of the community with knowledge of construction as well as the entire Board of Selectmen and Tim Downs. Greg Marlowe is leading the effort. My thanks to John Allyn, Steve Dean and Chris Kinsella for their help and willingness to help the community.

The issue of infrastructure maintenance is a national problem. Many bridges throughout the country are in poor shape. Our goal is to address this with a plan that saves the town money over the long-term and do it well before budget time next year.

Another infrastructure issue that is increasingly noticeable during this pandemic is the limitations of our current copper wire. If you have had a Zoom meeting and your device has frozen, this is a symptom of just plain overcrowding. You can't put ten pounds of mud into a five-pound container as Dolly Parton famously said. This is an issue that we will have to deal with in the future and the faster the better, both in terms of getting this done and in getting services seamlessly. We are looking for residents who would like to help us get this done for Falls Village. If you are interested, please contact me.

April 23, 2020

As was mentioned in our last blog post, we want to again thank all the residents and visitors to our village for rigorously following the emergency declarations of our Governor by staying at home, wearing masks, social distancing and all the other things that keep us safe and healthy. We can see signs that the Covid-19 infections are starting to plateau, especially in the hardest hit areas of our state.

We have been particularly fortunate to date in that we have no reported cases in our village. Note the underlining because there may be many of us who have had the virus but have been virtually symptom free. We emphasize that this is the time we must continue to be vigilant and follow carefully the guidelines for preventing infection so that we can return to some normality in the months to come.

Despite this, the government of the town must continue to function and it has, although in ways that were unimaginable prior to the epidemic. Our Town Hall remains closed to visitors, excepting those who must do vital activities. Meetings are being done remotely, using Zoom in our case. Little did we know that we were going to have to become technology masters overnight.

The biggest item facing us now is finalizing the budget. One of the issues facing our particular village is that our percentage of students in the Region One school district has risen tremendously in the past two years from 7.69% to 12.87%. This has raised the cost of Region One by \$557,334, an increase of 73.7%! The Region One budget isn't increasing by much but our share of it is.

This puts enormous pressure on our budgeting making process, especially given the pandemic

that is affecting us locally, nationally and globally. Our goal this year is to not increase taxes in this economically challenging time. Fortunately, we have always been frugal in our management of town finances which has allowed us to keep our general fund balances prudently high. These are funds that are held by the town in excess of year-to-year expenditures.

Consequently, the Board of Selectmen have proposed a spending plan that will reduce our expenditures by over \$100,000 this year, a decrease of over 5%. This is being done by tightening our belts in all departments and, in an unprecedented move, not funding capital reserves in this year, and asking that all departments monitor their expenditures closely as the 2020-2021 budget year unfolds.

Even given these cutbacks, we will have to draw down our general fund substantially during the next fiscal year. This will not be sustainable in the long run but we, as your Selectmen, feel this is critical to do given the crisis we are now undergoing. Further, we are anticipating that this surge we have seen in our Region One percentage of students will start to ease a bit in the fiscal year 2021-2022.

The budget processes continue but will be done by different means than those we have used in the past. By Emergency Declaration 7S, modified by Emergency Declaration 7CC, the Governor has allowed the budget decisions to be made finally by the Board of Selectmen instead of a Town Meeting. Consequently, our plan is to finalize budget recommendations by the Board of Finance by the end of this month and publish these final budgets on our website by May 1, 2020. We ask that residents respond to us by message or e-mail with any questions or concerns that they may have in the next two-week period to us. We will then hold a meeting, by Zoom, to answer these questions and others that you might have. If it then becomes impossible to hold a Town Meeting because of social distancing, the decision on adopting the budget would revert to the Board of Selectmen. We also would have the authority to approve any routine matters that would normally be handled at the Town Meeting such as appointing banks and making transfers from reserves to pay for capital expenses.

There are three transfers from capital reserves we are contemplating. The first is the replacement of a truck for the public works department which has been recommended by the Board of Finance. The second is a transfer from the bridge reserve to do a study of the cost of repairing bridges within the town which has been also been recommended by the Board of Finance. The third is the purchase of a fire truck for the Falls Village Volunteer Fire Department which will be requested by the Board of Selectmen for Board of Finance recommendation. The normal town process is that the Board of Selectmen make a request to the Board of Finance which then either does or does not make a recommendation to Town Meeting for approval.

The truck we are replacing for the public works is over 23 years old. It will be replaced by a new truck for a cost of \$188,741.23 of which \$41,276.73 will be provided by the state as part of the Volkswagen settlement. The net cost is \$147,464.50 to the Town of Canaan. The bridge study is necessary because of the fact that we have several bridges in the town that need some repairs. We are contracting with Cardinal Engineering to do complete inspections of those

bridges at a cost of \$13,750 to inspect those bridges that the state has designated as needing some repairs to identify both the remediation necessary and to give us sound estimates on the costs of doing so. This will enable us to prepare a long-term plan on extending the life-span of these bridges. The used fire truck that the FVVFD has purchased for the amount of \$125,000 came from Iowa and is in excellent shape. There will be additional expenses that will be entailed such as the cost of sending FVVFD staff to Iowa to inspect the truck, cartage from Iowa to here, making some changes in the truck itself to bring it inline with Connecticut regulations and do the annual inspection. In all, we estimate that this will cost about \$170,000 all-in versus purchasing a new one for \$350,000. It will replace two vehicles which we currently have that are quite old and were reaching the point that they could not pass inspection.

There is an old Chinese adage that says "May you live in interesting times." We are all doing that now. We are on the phone 24/7, listening to FEMA briefings, those from the governor, taking webinars explaining all the ins and outs of the various Emergency Declarations that have been made, attending to the affairs of the town, etc. In the end, all any of us can do to protect ourselves and others is to wash our hands, wear masks in public, stay at home as much as possible and make the best of it we can. Please do your best you to help your neighbors, check in on those who you suspect could use some help, especially the elderly who might need someone to shop for them or just to hear a friendly voice on the phone. And don't hesitate to call us if you have any issues that need attention. It's not an imposition, it's our job.

March 27, 2020

I want to send out a grateful thank you to all the residents of Falls Village for their compliance with the emergency orders that have been issued by Governor Lamont. Also, we should all be especially proud of the services provided to us by the volunteer ambulance and fire company in this town and especially their excellent personnel.

Both Michelle Hanson, who is our Emergency Management Director for the Town of Canaan, and I, as First Selectmen, are spending a lot of time on the phone with the Region 5 EMS Director and the Governor as well as many of our support Groups, such as COST, CCM, our Regional COG and others. Michelle's help and leadership has been invaluable to me and the town. All those hours we have spent in the last year going to drills has not gone to waste. I can't thank her enough. Our Social Services Director, Theresa Grainey, is doing a great job of making sure that those of greatest need are getting the support they need. We have been able to keep our groceries flowing and, if this becomes an issue in the future, we will call on our town to keep it stocked.

We continue to be under the guidance of voluntary isolation and the maintenance of the simple safety steps that keep us all safe as well as those around us. It's a good time to catch up on old tv shows, old movies, that hit Netflix or Amazon Prime series or that book you bought but never had the time to read. Maybe do a little yard work as it looks like we are going to have an early spring.

At this time, we have no reported cases of Covid-19 in Falls Village, Cornwall or North Canaan. We ask that those of you who have taken refuge in your summer home from some of the 'hotspots' in our region also follow the guidelines that were established by our governor to stay home, self-isolate for two weeks if you believe you have been exposed, etc.. If we continue to follow those best practices, we might be able to avoid having a cluster of cases as has happened elsewhere. Last week, we did declare a local state of emergency despite the absence of cases in the village. Given that, we still might undergo unusual expenses in our region that might be unexpectedly high. This gives us the ability to get funds directly from the federal government to pay for these expenses should this happen. Also, it underscores the potential dangers of the coronavirus and that the steps to avoid contagion are of paramount importance.

On Monday, the Governor announced that the schools will remain closed until April 20th. This is an extension of his original two-week closure. On a phone call yesterday, held for the CEO's of our 169 towns, he intimated that it is possible schools may not re-open this year. Governor Lamont is holding twice a week phone conferences with the mayors and First Selectmen in which we have the ability to ask questions and get feedback from the government leaders on critical issues. He also held a CEO only call yesterday. While I can't speak for everyone, I personally feel that the governor has been proactive, transparent and extremely helpful during this crisis. I give him and his appointed officials very high marks.

The best source of information on the virus is the portal noted on our website. You can see the latest data on the outbreak and where it has hit the hardest, practical advice and referrals to the many programs that are available on the state and federal level. These might be especially valuable for those small businesses which have been adversely affected during this pandemic as well as those whom have lost employment during this period.

Also, note that Governor Lamont, after I wrote this yesterday afternoon, has banned gatherings of more than 5 people.

Moving to a more local issue, we are going through budget time and must adopt one by, at the latest, early June. Given the bans on large meetings, this has created some confusion on how to proceed. We will be publishing our budgets online this year so that they are available to everyone in the village who would like to review them. If the closures or bans extend past the dates that we would normally have our budget hearings and town meeting, the state has adopted procedures that we can follow to as closely mimic our in-person meetings with virtual ones. We hope that we don't have to go down this path, but, if we do, we are preparing to do so. The normal business of the town must move forward despite it all.

There is some good news. We have issued a permit to install new gas tanks at the station at the intersection of 63 and 7. These will alleviate the long trek up to North Canaan or down to Cornwall bridge. Also, plans for the building at 107 Main Street continue to be developed and we are optimistic that this will add more vitality to our small downtown area.

Our Town Hall offices continue to be closed to the public until further notice. If you need anything, leave a message as directed and someone will get back to you promptly.

Stay safe, stay healthy and stay happy. This isn't the most enjoyable period we have gone through as a nation and as a village but rest assured—it will end and things will get back to normal.

MARCH 16, 2020

The Coronavirus, Covid-19, continues to spread throughout the United States. The only state, as of last night, without this disease is West Virginia. With the new testing regime, announced yesterday, we expect the number of confirmed cases to increase dramatically. The news media has done an excellent job in reporting the actions of the government and you can keep up with these at the links on our website.

We have taken the unprecedented action of putting Town Hall on lockdown for the next two weeks. While we will be in the Town Hall on a daily basis to make sure the business of the town goes on uninterrupted, we will not be allowing visitors to enter. The schools have also been closed for at least two weeks. We will be reevaluating the length of these closures as circumstances dictate.

All of us at Town Hall forward our phone calls to our e-mail so we will be capable of answering any questions or dealing with any problems on a timely basis. If you can not get through to our phones for any reason, do not hesitate to reach me either on my cell, 215-917-1335, or at home, 860-453-4187.

Keep safe, keep up your social distancing and wash your hands. And if you have symptoms that lead you to believe you might have the coronavirus, stay at home and call your physician.

FEBRUARY 27, 2020

Hope everyone is enjoying our 'unwinter' winter. There's a silver lining in every cloud and we are using a lot less treatment on the roads than was anticipated. Good for budgets, bad for skiing.

There are some good things going in our village. One of the most important is the desire of several of our townspeople to create a Village Green Market in the 107 Main Street property on the first floor. This is still in its nascent period and we'll have much more to say about this in future blog posts. This would be a co-op with diverse offerings but centering on being a place for local farmers to sell produce. A clear business plan will be produced giving us all a firm basis on which to support it. Nonetheless, I am inspired by the upswelling of work done by local citizens on their own initiative to develop something that will be a long-lasting asset to the town if successful--- and I think it will be.

Another bright development is that the owners of the gas station at the intersection of routes 63 and 7 have applied for a permit to install new tanks and for redeveloping the site. This is a huge plus for the town and will eventually alleviate the drive north, south, east or west to fill up our transport.

At our Town Meeting last week, we voted to receive the official Town Report and audit of the town. Also, we likewise approved the purchase of a new town truck to replace the 1997 Ford truck that has served the town very well for the past 23 years. Keeping this truck up and running is a credit to our public works employees but the time had come when we were throwing good money after bad. Because new trucks are so expensive and our plan is to replace trucks on a five year cycle, we plan on increasing the annual money we put aside for truck replacement to \$40,000 per year from its current level of \$30,000 per year. Our town is getting a grant from the Volkswagen settlement to the state of Connecticut for \$37,000 which is a real plus and a credit to Tim Downs and his group for writing up the grant request.

The sale of our town water works was approved at this meeting also. I do note that there was a big turnout for this meeting and the audience was able to ask questions about this both to town officials and to representatives of Aquarion who will be the buyer of these assets. While the execution of the agreement with Aquarion will be completed very quickly, this sale has to be approved by PURA, the Public Utilities Regulatory Agency. We anticipate, based on historical precedence, that this approval will take between 6-9 months. Once we get this the sale will be finalized and we will receive \$345,000 for the assets of this entity. Of this amount, about \$210,000 will be used to pay off the remaining debt on the water tanks constructed ten years ago on Beebe Hill Road. Given that we will keep any cash on hand, we anticipate that the general fund will increase in the area of \$145,000. That assumes that we have no major capital expenses in the interim period. Both the Board of Finance and the Board of Selectmen had unanimously approved this sale prior to the Town Meeting. We do not anticipate that our water bills will go down immediately but our opinion is that they will be lowered at some time in the future. This is one of the key points to be negotiated with PURA.

On other town news, we are in the midst of our annual budgeting for the town and for the Kellogg school. This is a grueling process. Not much to report on this now but we do have a much larger bill coming from the regional high school due to our percentage of students in the High School being much larger than it has been in previous years. The exact amount of this is not yet known as the high school has not finished its budgeting for 2020-21. We do aim to have these ready by late March for an initial presentation to the Board of Finance by both the town and Kellogg. After the Board of Finance make their revisions, we then will have a hearing in late April to discuss these with the town at large and then a final approval of these will be presented to a Town Meeting in May.

One of our major concerns about this year's budgeting was taken off the table by the Governor in the past week or so. There has been no bonding of the payments we were promised in the state budget for town road aid and for the Local Capital Improvement Program, probably because it was being held hostage in the toll debate. Since tolls are off the table for the

moment, and I personally hope forever, these budgeted funds will be released to the 169 towns in the state that heavily rely of this funding.