**Montpelier Notes,** An occasional email for Pownal and Woodford residents. If you would prefer not to receive these notes please reply to botzow@sover.net and I'll remove you from the list. If you would like to be added please let me know. I do not give your email address to others. --Bill Botzow

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June 9, 2007

Hello All,

 There are many meetings on the schedule this time of year. I’ve been able to attend some of them and wish I could get to others. Here are a few.

Next week there’s one on **Watershed Basin Planning** thatyou may not have heard of. The meeting is Wednesday, June 13th at the Pownal Center Firehouse from 6:30 to 8:00 PM. The meeting will be led by Joshua Gorman, watershed coordinator from the Agency of Natural Resources. He is assigned to our basin and the neighboring watershed to our east for the Deerfield River. This is an opportunity for those interested in water issues in Pownal to attend and offer their thoughts. Are you concerned about a local body of water, stream or wetland? Would you like to make sure your favorite spot remains that way? Basin planning meetings are being held throughout Vermont and offer Vermonters a chance to identify what is important to their watershed. Since I won’t be able to attend this Wednesday because of out of town meetings that day, I attended a similar meeting in Bennington last week and learned a great deal of useful information about Vermont’s basin planning process and about ongoing work by our local river and conservation groups .

Also next Wednesday, **Pownal’s housing group** will be holding their monthly meeting. They will meet at the Pownal Firehouse next to the Pownal Post Office at 6 PM. The group has made great progress over the last year and look forward to numerous initiatives in the coming year. Contact Pat Woodard by email at p\_woodard@hotmail.com or call 802/379-0672 or 802/823-0209 for more information.

Another Pownal citizen initiative underway is gathering information on establishing an **historic district** in Pownal Center. We are an historical area and older structures in our communities tell the stories of the lives and hard work of the generations before us that built our community. With up to date town plans, new Village Designations and committed townspeople we have the tools to continue to care for our town for the benefit of future generations.

Monday the Selectboard will be looking at **town roads** the road foreman has suggested should be reclassified as Class 4 (trails). The roads are currently Class 3, which means they are maintained by the town. Class 4 roads are open to the public but unmaintained. The roads total 2.2 miles. The following roads are being considered: Bannister Hill Road, Benedict Road, Cash Place, Crow Hill Road, Hemlock Hill Road, Huse Lane, Lavino Road, Purcell Dugway, Roizin Road, Thompson Pond Road, and Upper County Road. The select board encourages residents to participate in the discussion.

**END OF SESSION REPORT**

After the Legislative Session ends, I write an end of session report, print copies and put them around town. In Pownal I’ve left them at The Village Market, Winchester’s, Jelly’s Store in North Pownal and the Town Office. In Woodford they are at the Town Office and Dave’s Auto. The report is an overview of the legislature’s work up until adjournment. Here’s this year’s end-of-session report:

Dear Friends and Neighbors,

The Legislature adjourned May 12. During the session we adopted a reasonable and balanced budget and addressed many issues important to Vermonters. I’ve outlined below some of the work we accomplished. If you would like more detail on any of the information that follows, please let me know. Serving you is a real honor and privilege. In the months ahead I’m looking forward to listening to your thoughts and ideas so I can serve you better. Please be in touch whenever I can help you with your business with the state. If you'd like to receive my regular email *Montpelier Notes*, please let me know. My contact information is at the end of this letter.

 *Bill Botzow*

**Prosperous Vermont ~** The decisions we make today will impact the quality of life we leave for others. The major spending bills that came through the legislature this year focused on building a strong Vermont that invests in sustainable energy, modern telecommunications, health care, workforce development, and infrastructure to meet our changing needs. The capital bonding and construction bill invests in water quality, broadband services, and school construction assistance. The transportation bill addresses deteriorating highway infrastructure, invests in public transit, improves rail transportation, and establishes new vehicle labeling incentives for reducing greenhouse gases. The annual budget bill invests more in higher education, childcare, and workforce development and scholarships. It helps working families move out of poverty and supports transitioning youth out of state custody, helping provide them with a more secure future. It invests in child abuse and sexual and domestic violence prevention, which will lead to greater security for many. Finally the budget protects funds designated for the Catamount Health program from being diverted to other programs.

**Vermont Telecommunications Authority** ~ Because of Vermont’s rugged landscape and rural population, it is difficult to get modern broadband internet connections and cellular phone signals to every corner of the state. The legislature formed the Vermont Telecommunication Authority to bring full coverage of high-speed internet service and cell phone signals within reach of every Vermont home and business by the end of 2010, starting with unserved Vermonters. ~ ong v 377 wo 377 words)eers.  ions. many. Finally the budget protects funds designated for the Catamount Health program from bThe Authority will have up to $40 million in revenue bonding authority to use as incentives to make serving unserved areas possible, and to build as many as 120 new towers on which providers can locate their transmission equipment. It will also help construct needed fiber-optic lines to bring the signals within reach of the towers.

**Climate change and economic opportunity** ~ The climate change bill reduces greenhouse gases, saves money for Vermont businesses and homeowners and create jobs. It invests in renewable technologies for Vermont businesses, which will help turn Vermont into a center of economic growth. The bill, H. 520, expands the work of Efficiency Vermont, which helps Vermonters save money on their electric bills, to include heating fuels (oil, propane, and natural gas). In the last four years, the cost of heating oil has increased by 114%. By reducing heat loss, Vermonters will use less heating fuel, and save money. The controversy over the legislation concerns funding the efficiency utility in its first three years. The bill modifies the low property tax granted to Entergy (Vermont Yankee) with a fair rate that is lower than what other Vermont businesses are paying, but comparable to what is proposed for wind generation. The new rate would be transitioned in over three years. Entergy paid less last year in taxes than it did in 2002 even though it added a multi-million dollar addition to production capacity that has enabled it to generate millions in new revenues. Entergy’s generation tax is divided between the education fund and the general fund.

**Education Funding** ~ The legislature passed an education finance bill that maintains quality schools and local control of spending decisions. The bill is the result of long debate and compromise. If a school district spends above the statewide per-pupil average, AND the proposed budget contains an increase that is above the inflation index plus 1%, the budget will be voted in two parts. The proposal calls for voters to first approve spending growth that is in line with the state benchmark. Then, if spending needs to grow beyond the state average, voters need to approve the extra spending based on local information and local reasons in a separate ballot measure. The benchmark allows for reasonable growth. The two votes happen concurrently. In Pownal, Woodford and the Southwest Vermont Supervisory Union, school boards have consistently kept spending under the state average. This measure will not change how our local school boards present budgets unless there are extraordinary spending needs. Ultimately, when voters receive good information they make good choices. The bill also affirms the current income sensitivity structure. There will also be a number of summer studies, including a study of rolling reappraisals, which could lessen the impact of changes in the common level of appraisal. The legislature will also study governance issues.

**Transportation** ~ Vermont’s aging transportation infrastructure poses serious challenges. Approximately 25% of our roads are rated “very poor.” At current spending rates 48% of our roads will be rated “very poor” in five years. The situation is similar for our bridges. A legislative study committee will make recommendations on the widening gap between transportation needs and funding. The legislature increased funding for local road projects by $2 million, which helps property taxes since municipal property taxes are the only way for towns to fund repairs to local roads and bridges. The legislature also increased funding for public transit by $2.3 million for new fuel efficient busses that will replace an aging high-mileage fleet .

In our area, new dollars went to the northern leg of the bypass. Previously appropriated dollars for the southern leg will be used for land purchases to place fill from northern leg construction. In Woodford, funding continues for the VT 9 Bridge. In Pownal, the bridge on VT 346 at the foot of Oak Hill Road will be replaced and the intersection realigned. Also transportation dollars are finally in place for the bridge over the Hoosic River in North Pownal. The Agency of Transportation currently plans to advertise the project in late 2007 and undertake the work in 2008.

# Capital Bonding and Construction ~ This year’s Capital bill contains $5.85 million for water pollution control and drinking water supply programs for municipalities including $1,900,000 for the next stages of the Pownal Wastewater project. The dollars are structured in such a way to make sure the project will stay on schedule. Also, over $1 million is allocated to community grants for historic preservation, historic barns, cultural facilities, recreational and educational facilities, broadband, and human services. The bill includes funding for the state health and forensic labs and funds a proper state archive facility to protect historical documents and important records. Financing the state share of approved school construction projects is a growing concern. The Education department requested $33 million this year. The Governor recommended $9 million. In the final bill we provided $10.8 million for construction aid, emergency repairs, energy projects, and projects that extend the life of a building.

**Housing** ~ Throughout the last biennium and during this year’s session, the legislature has made affordable housing a priority. The General, Housing, and Military Affairs committee took extensive testimony and passed a bill to reduce lead hazards in housing. That bill is awaiting action next year by the Human Services and Ways and Means Committees in the House. Two mobile home bills, which I sponsored, passed the House. One bill clarifies the statute on the sale and closure of mobile home parks and the other updates our mobile home laws. A working group of housing developers, housing advocates, planners, and environmentalists will meet this summer and fall to develop recommendations for legislation leading to new, affordable housing for Vermonters. Also, the legislature increased by 4.5% the appropriation for the Vermont Housing Conservation Board and increased funding for homeless shelters by $150,000.

**Corrections** ~ Vermont’s prison costs are a challenge. We live in the one of the safest states, and have a declining crime rate, but the cost of prisons and jails consumes more and more of our budget without making society safer. 15 years ago we invested twice as much in Higher Education than we did in Corrections. Now we spend more on prisons that we do on the University of Vermont, all the Vermont State Colleges, and college scholarships for Vermont students combined. Also Vermont’s largest high school is Corrections.

All three branches of government are collaborating on this complex problem. Speaker Symington, Senator Shumlin, Governor Douglas, and Chief Justice Reiber have convened a leadership group to accomplish three goals: (1) make society safer, (2) reduce the number of people incarcerated, and (3) save taxpayer dollars.

**Agriculture** ~ This year’s Agriculture legislation fosters the development of a diversified agricultural sector, maintains the state’s prominence as a major regional milk producer, and ensures continued stewardship of the land. The legislature passed legislation to boost dairy prices. New policy supports a “buy local” system for food and dairy products and addresses a shortage of slaughter facilities by authorizing the use of mobile slaughter establishments on farms and at agricultural fairgrounds. Legislation also extends current law allowing farmers to slaughter, without inspection but with Agency of Agriculture guidelines and clear labeling, less than a thousand birds for sale to individuals and at farmers’ markets.

**Protecting water** ~ Vermont faces several challenges when addressing our water and natural resource needs. The legislature passed measures to reduce phosphorous pollution and to preserve septic standards. We protected the ability of homeowners living in impaired watersheds to sell their property with a clean title and funded mapping an important resource, groundwater. The legislature also passed a bill that will engage the public in reviewing new ideas for increased funding for the Fish and Wildlife Department.

**Campaign Finance Reform** ~ Vermont Campaign Finance Law, was adopted in 1997 out of concern over escalating campaign fundraising and spending which can undermine public confidence in government. When the U.S. Supreme Court overturned Vermont’s campaign finance laws because of Vermont’s low limits, the legislature needed to act to reestablish reasonable limits on contribution amounts. In determining new contribution limits and overall campaign finance reform, the legislature set limits supported by testimony and evidence, which uphold First Amendment rights and adhere to the Constitution.

**Working Vermonters**  ~ Members of the Vermont National Guard will receive 15 days leave from their regular employment to attend guard training and drills. All permanent employees will be entitled to return to their employment following Vermont National Guard call up. Pay and death benefits equivalent to federal guidelines are now authorized for guard members called up on state duty. The legislature also increased tuition benefits for Vermont National Guard members attending UVM.

An estimated 4,000 Vermonters serve as tipped wage workers in our hotels, motels, and restaurants. The House passed legislation increasing the threshold for a “tipped worker” from the level established in 1957 of $30 per month in tipped wages to $120 per month. Also, beginning next January, the $3.65 tipped employee minimum wage will be indexed to the cost of living. . so lights the importance of that sector in Vermont

**Workforce Training and Development** ~ Vermonters believe in education for its inherent value, and because it is the path to productive and meaningful jobs and careers. This year, the legislature passed legislation that supports grant and scholarship aid for college tuition, loan repayment in the health care field, new internship and career awareness activities for high school and college students, and job-specific training for recent graduates and adults. Vermont employers want to expand and need a skilled workforce. At the same time Vermonters are seeking good paying jobs. This legislation fills several significant gaps: the gap between higher education and the ability to pay for it; the gap between traditional academic education and real job-readiness; and the gap between workers’ current job skills and those needed for another job. Scholarship and grant funds can be accessed through VSAC, UVM and the state colleges. Funds for internships will be released as grants to high schools, colleges, tech centers, businesses and business groups, and non-profit organizations. Interns will gain work experience with Vermont employers. Training programs will get individuals directly into jobs, and will provide businesses with a trained workforce. Information can be obtained from the Vermont Department of Labor at 828-4000. Scholarship questions should be directed to VSAC at 1-800-642-3177 and the individual colleges. Loan repayment information can be obtained from the Area Health Education Center (AHEC) at 656-2179.

**Prescription Drugs** ~ The legislature passed several bills to help ensure the success of health care reforms passed in the last legislative session. S.115 addresses the fastest rising health care spending sector, prescription drugs. On average, each Vermonter spends $1,000 on prescriptions annually, 38% out-of-pocket. S.115 regulates Pharmacy Benefit Managers, drug marketing and prescription drug data mining to lower prescription drug costs. It includes a Pharmaceutical Manufacturers Fee to fund its cost containment provisions. Transparency, consumer protection, cost containment, prescriber privacy, and evidence-based prescribing are the guiding principles of S.115. The bill is another important step in overall health care reform.

**Health Care/Catamount** ~ Legislative work on health care focused on ensuring the success of the health care reform measures passed in 2006. Reforms address three major health care concerns: controlling sky-rocketing health care costs, increasing access to health care, and improving health care quality. The legislature passed two major health care bills. We expanded and better integrated the Blueprint for Health, a program to improve care for people with chronic disease. The bill also creates a pilot program to implement reforms in one location before we make changes statewide. Other provisions in the bills include a grant program for doctors to adopt Electronic Medical Records, provisions that make it easier for residents to apply for state-funded health care programs; and initiatives to address Vermont’s primary care practitioner shortage.

The legislature also responded to concerns from Vermont businesses about the Employer Assessment, a funding source for Catamount Health. The legislature passed exemptions to the Employer Assessment for some seasonal and part-time workers. The legislature and the administration are committed to a comprehensive outreach and enrollment campaign targeted to uninsured Vermonters for Catamount Health. Vermonters can begin signing up this August, with coverage beginning in October. Catamount Health will provide a comprehensive set of health services, with the premium depending on income. To find out if you qualify for Catamount, go to http//hcr.vermont.gov or call 1-800-250-8427.

**Rural Economic Development** ~ The legislature continues its focus on economic development throughout Vermont. Several important initiatives invest in our future. The new telecommunications authority aims to bring up-to-date broadband and wireless communications to currently unserved Vermonters.

~ Broadband and modern communications will allow Vermont’s small businesses to market their goods and services internationally, support the growing work-at-home sector, promote public safety and health care delivery.

~ The next generation workforce development bill supports job creation and job improvement. Employers are looking for better workers and Vermonters are looking for better jobs. Young people finishing their education seek good salaried positions so they can stay in Vermont. The bill encourages innovative approaches to workforce training and sets the Secretary of Labor as the leader and coordinator of statewide efforts. Businesses, private and public educational institutions and non-profit organizations will be able to apply for support for these efforts.

~ The legislature revitalized Vermont’s Job Start Program, a loan and technical assistance program for low income Vermonters who want to start businesses. The legislature made necessary changes in statute for Job Start to be administered by an experienced non-profit community development lender with statewide presence.

~ In agriculture the legislature passed several measures. Dairy farmers will see a premium payment for milk when prices fall and the cost of trucking the milk from the farm may be paid by milk purchasers rather than the farmer.

Local wine-makers will be able to acquire licenses to offer wine-tasting at farmers' markets and Vermont’s micro-brewers will be able to better market their specialty malt liquors.

~ The energy bill offers great promise to construction trades and environmental technology developers through incentives for energy efficiency measures, weatherization, and alternative green energy development in bio-mass, hydro, solar and wind.

~ The House authorized the Speaker to appoint a legislative summer working group to develop legislation for next session related to forestry. Forests cover over 75% of Vermont and are critical to our economy. The resolution identifies critical issues in forestry such as access to capital, the workers’ compensation system, curbing the parcelization of Vermont land, reviewing the operation of the current use program, the need for modernizing and opening more wood mills, harvesting more low-quality wood for energy production and to reduce carbon emissions, and other topics related to the future of Vermont’s forests.

~ A resolutionrecognizing the economic importance of farmers’ markets to villages and downtowns and to diversified agriculture sets the table for possible legislation next year.

Looking forward to seeing you and hearing from you this summer!

Stay in touch,

Bill

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