

BBA OFFICERS

Pres: Nick Nikolaidis
VP: Bev Washburn
Sec: Heidi Nikolaidis
Treas: Carroll Ketchum

BBA NEWS

Feb. 2006

Bethel Business Association

THE JANUARY LEGISLATIVE BREAKFAST

The economy was the main subject of discussion at the Bethel Business Association's first legislative breakfast of the season on Monday morning, January 30. Bethel's legislative representative Sandy Haas was there, as well as Rich Tarrant who is a Republican candidate for the U.S. senate.

Haas discussed the legislature's "rural economic development working group" in which she participated, and called attention to a house bill (H.690) that she and others are co-sponsoring as an outgrowth of that effort. The bill would "identify and document" the creative sector of Vermont's economy, and it carries a small appropriation to support artists, musicians, performers and other culturally based enterprises. *(Continued on Page 3)*

COMING EVENTS

Monday, February 27

7:30 AM

Legislative Breakfast
at the Black Forest Cafe

Wednesday, March 1

6:30 PM

Regular Meeting
at Paradigm Consulting Co.

Saturday, March 11

9:00 AM - 5:00 PM

Home & Garden Show
at Whitcomb High School

Thursday, March 16

6:00 PM

Dinner, Whitcomb High School
followed at 7:00 PM by a
Concert by the 40th Army Band

Monday, March 27

7:30 AM

Legislative Breakfast
at the Black Forest Cafe

JOIN THE BBA !!!

The BBA is a non-profit, unincorporated association of professional and business people dedicated to improving the commercial, aesthetic, civic and environmental aspects of the town of Bethel. We want YOU to join the BBA. Come to our meetings and see what we are all about. You may write us at: **BBA, PO Box 342, Bethel, VT 05032,** or call the membership chairperson Geneva Gaiko at 234-9876.

BBA HOME AND GARDEN SHOW IS COMING UP !!!!

Something new is coming to Bethel. It is the Bethel Business Association's Home and Garden Show, which will take place on March 11, from 9-5 at the Whitcomb High School Gym.

The show will feature great firms that offer many of the same products as big suppliers, but with highly personalized customer service and economical pricing. There will be garden items, tools, utensils, plants, hardware of all kinds, lumber, kitchen and bath combinations, stoves and ovens, interior decorations, antiques, novelties, and lending institutions that offer financing for your projects. The Bethel Historical Society will have a display, and there will be booths for food and beverages.

The show is a unique opportunity to see first hand what is available in our area. Admission is free, and there is still room for additional vendors. Contact Bev Washburn at 234-5562.

DINNER WITH THE 40th ARMY BAND!!!

Come to a fundraising dinner on Thursday, March 16 at 6:00 PM at Whitcomb High School to benefit the BBA and the Whitcomb music department. It will be followed by a concert by the 40th Army Band at 7:00 PM. Cost: \$8.00 a person at the door. (This event replaces a mixer at Spaulding Press, to be rescheduled later).

Check it Out!!!

www.bethelvermont.com

FINAL PROPERTY TAX ESTIMATES

In late January the Bethel selectboard finished putting together an eighteen-month expenditure budget totaling \$1,373,271 for all of 2006 and the first half of 2007. The eighteen-month period is transitional, to allow the town to move from a calendar year budget to a July 1 – June 30 fiscal year budget beginning in mid-2007.

After subtracting anticipated revenues, the amount to be raised by taxes to cover the twelve months of 2006 will be \$703,682. The voters generally add appropriations for the ambulance service and certain human services donations (which will be relatively unchanged from last year). These appear as separate warned items that will bring the total amount to be raised by taxes to \$779,325. Although this represents a 3.9% increase over last year's total of \$749,851, an increase in the grand list will bring the municipal tax rate up by only 2.6% over last year's tax of \$0.73 per \$100 of property value.

Also in late January, the Bethel school board formally approved a new budget proposal of \$4,404,566 for 2006-2007, which will be presented to the voters on town meeting day, March 7. The tax impact for residential property is estimated at \$2.189 per \$100 of property valuation, and the tax cap for a home and the first two acres would be 2.94% for household incomes of \$85,000 or less.

The new school budget is \$142,406 or 3.13% lower than last year's budget as the result of a recent school board decision to reduce by \$300,000 what would have been a much higher budget due to an increase in fixed costs and contractual obligations. The overall reduction in budget means the elimination of five full-time teaching positions, as well as some part-time positions. Even so, the projected \$2.189 tax rate is 2.7 % higher than last year's rate of \$2.131. (The school tax rate for commercial property and second homes will be unaffected by the school budget, and will be about \$2.01 per \$100 of valuation this year.)

Therefore, Bethel's combined school and municipal taxes for residential property this year will be \$2.94. (See back page for related story.)

LOCAL LAW ENFORCEMENT COMING SOON

Town constable Jim Bennett has completed the first phase of basic training for part-time law enforcement officers at the Vermont Police Academy last month. He scored 100% in his firearms qualification, 96% in his firearms test, and a 92% in his final examination.

His certificate of training grants him provisional law enforcement authority, but only under the supervision and control of a fully-certified officer. He will presently undertake the second phase of his training, and then complete sixty hours of fieldwork as part of the third phase, after which he will be able to exercise law enforcement authority on his own. He said he anticipates completing all his requirements in a few months.

The selectmen decided in December to authorize Bennett to exercise other law enforcement functions (such as traffic stops and ticketing) after he completes the requisite training that would legally allow Bennett to exercise such police powers. At the moment his authority is limited to animal control matters and school events.



BBA member George Burnham with a scale model he made of the town hall. It will be displayed at various events to help raise money for town hall restoration. (See back page for more on town hall.)

LEGISLATIVE BREAKFAST *(Continued from Page 1)*

Haas noted that the bill fills a need, since Vermont's economic development corporations don't support such activities.

Bethel selectboard chair Neal Fox (a BBA member who is also director of the Green Mountain Economic Development Corporation) disagreed. He noted that his organization had recently helped a group of twelve artists establish themselves in White River Junction. Fox agreed that small entrepreneurship is important in all areas, but noted that other economic needs must sometimes take priority. He recalled that when it seemed that Vermont Castings might leave Bethel, he met with corporate and state officials to find ways to preclude such a move, while others were discussing the desirability of a tea or coffee shop in Bethel village. "There are times when we've got to put our emphasis on some of the larger enterprises because of the number of people they employ," Fox said.

Aaron Melville, an attorney residing in Vermont, asked Haas and Tarrant to comment on the Vermont economy, noting that he himself works in New Hampshire because there are more and better paying jobs there. Haas replied that Vermont is not merely about money, but about a way of life, a quality of life, community and values. Tarrant agreed with Haas on that score, and commented that Vermonters are great people and that Vermont is a great place to live, but he also said that Vermont's economy does need improvement. One way that rural areas can improve is through better technology or "rural technification," which he said could have an effect similar to "rural electrification" programs of yesteryear.

Tarrant noted that he built a large computer software business in Vermont which now has a national clientele and serves the bulk of academic institutions and hospitals in the country, with overseas interests as well. "I have seen every kind of health care system--the good, the bad and the ugly," he said, "and I have ideas how to fix ours." He was very clear that he opposes having separate state systems that are inevitably altered every election year. "I do not think health care can be fixed at the local level," he said. He added that he would like to see the national Medicare bureaucracy expand to encompass state Medicaid programs, but he does not favor a single payer health system. He recognized that such a system does have good aspects, such as bringing medical coverage to the uninsured, but he said he has seen the negative aspects of such a system first hand in Britain where the elderly are at the "bottom of the totem pole" for decent health care.

Tarrant told the gathering that he is an ex-Democrat who became a Republican because of his belief in fiscal responsibility, but now recognizes that the Republicans are also weak in that area. "I used to criticize tax-and-spend Democrats, but now I criticize borrow-and-spend Republicans," he noted. In the educational area, Tarrant criticized unfunded mandates, such as special education requirements for kids who need different environments in which to learn. He said that there should be more freedom to seek local solutions, such as special classrooms where kids can enjoy "home schooling at school."

Lester Corwin of South Royalton, asked Haas and Tarant, "What will you do to preserve traditional marriage in view of legislative proposals that would permit same-sex marriage." Tarrant said he believes that marriage itself is a union of a man and a woman, but he supports civil unions and would like to see civil unions expanded to cover any kind of domestic partnership. "I don't believe sexual preferences should play a role in the state's treatment of domestic partners." Haas, on the other hand, stated unequivocally that she would support a same-sex marriage bill.



State Rep. Sandy Haas and US Senate Candidate Rich Tarrant at the BBA Legislative Breakfast

NEXT LEGISLATIVE BREAKFAST

The next legislative breakfast will be on February 27, at 7:30 AM at the Black forest Café. Local representatives Sandy Haas and Rozo McLaughlin will be invited. Windsor county senators John Campbell, Matt Dunne, and Peter Welch who did not respond to our January invitation, will be invited again.

BETHEL TALKING SCHOOL CONSOLIDATION WITH RANDOLPH

Last month, Bethel school board members initiated informal talks with their Randolph counterparts on a possible consolidation of their respective high schools. The Bethel board has approved the inclusion of a \$5,000 item in the warning for the March 7 school district meeting to fund an eventual formal study of a Bethel–Randolph consolidation

Parallel to any Bethel-Randolph discussions are formal talks between Bethel and Royalton regarding possible consolidation. These talks have been going on since last June pursuant to an appropriation by both school districts last year. It has emerged from the work of the Bethel-Royalton consolidation committee that consolidating the two high schools would yield a lower tax rate for Bethel, with minimal economic disadvantage to Royalton. Royalton, on the other hand, might gain some advantage in a better physical plant and broader curriculum offerings. Nevertheless, there is concern that the two schools together still might not achieve the “critical mass” necessary to enjoy significant economies of scale in a truly advantageous consolidation.

The Bethel-Randolph possibility has a certain appeal because the Randolph facilities are large enough to absorb Bethel’s students, and the joint population of the two schools would be large enough to reduce significantly Bethel’s cost-per-pupil, which has driven up Bethel’s school property tax rate to the point that it is currently one of the highest in the state. Bethel students would also enjoy the expanded curriculum offerings of a larger school, and greater proximity to Vermont Technical College where a certain number of Bethel students take courses every year.

Of course, Bethel could simply “tuition out” its students to Randolph, which in turn would be happy to receive them—along with the tuition money. But such a procedure would be tantamount to relinquishing Bethel’s control over the education of its students. A consolidation, on the other hand, would give Bethel some seats on a joint board. One of Randolph’s incentives for consolidation with Bethel is that it would very much like to refurbish its physical plant, and if its done in context of consolidating two schools, the state would fund half of it.

But there are other options also to be considered. One that was originally suggested for discussion by BBA member Neal Fox has been closing Whitcomb High School and tuitioning its students to neighboring schools as chosen by parents. Another is to downsize Whitcomb radically in terms of faculty and staff to conform to shrinking demographics. Another, suggested by BBA member Lang Durfee, is to create a private school, like Sharon Academy, to replace Whitcomb and obviate burdensome state involvement. These topics will be the subject of extensive discussion in the coming months. If many of these ideas don’t pan out, there’s still the Bethel-Royalton consolidation possibility that is still the subject of formal negotiation.

**** BETHEL TOWN HALL INFORMATIONAL MEETING ****

A Bethel Town Hall informational meeting will take place on Thursday, February 23, 2006 at 6:00 - 7:30 p.m. at the Bethel Public Library. Don Hirsch, of Don Hirsch Design Studio, has completed several restoration projects in Vermont, and will assist with the development of an organizational framework for the restoration of the Bethel Town Hall. The agenda will include an overview of the project, establishing a timeline, projected costs and fundraising. Among items to be addressed will be roles and responsibilities regarding the project. The selectmen plan to be there and the meeting is open to the public. All are encouraged to attend and there will be time for questions.

Note: Last month the selectboard received an engineering study showing that the old curtain drain surrounding the building is inadequate. The engineers suggest a new drain system, and regrading the ground around the building to draw surface water away from it. The plans also provide for a new water access system that would permit the installation of sprinklers to meet fire code requirements. A bid package is being prepared. It is possible that money in the town hall fund, plus grants, and a requested \$25,000 appropriation from the voters could cover the expense.