

Town of Freedom
Selectmen
Mid-Year Report

In keeping with our efforts to inform Freedom's citizens about the workings of their Town government, we're once again providing this mid-year report. We're pleased to report that the Town is on a solid footing and we're honored to have your confidence.

Municipal Properties

The Town has foreclosed on one non-residential property this year, and we expect to put it up for public auction in June. We're required to post the sale, so everyone has a fair chance to bid, and we'll be sending out notices, so please pay attention to your mail.

In a review of Town properties, the Selectmen discovered that the deed to the property where the old Head Start building had been had never been transferred from RSU 3 (formerly MSAD 3) to the Town. This meant that the land on which the Town Office now sits was actually owned by the School District. We've received a transfer deed from RSU 3, and our title to the property is now clear.

The Post Office has provided steady revenue for the Town with no expenses to date this year. Apart from routine maintenance on the furnace and some small modifications to the current gutter, we don't expect any major expenditures. We're pleased with the Town's decision to keep the property rather than sell it at auction as it normally does with tax-acquired property. Rather than the historical tax revenues of about \$1000 per year for the property, the Town receives nearly \$8000 per year in rent, roughly equivalent to 3 or 4 average taxpayers. The Town pays no utilities, heating, or plowing bills.

Since the purchase of the Skidgel lot is rather complex, we'll discuss that in a separate part of this report.

Solid Waste

Our decision to purchase a compactor truck and take care of our municipal waste as a part of Town services, rather than contract the work, continues to create savings. As you know, we modified our spring cleanup program, stretching it over almost a month. Picking the discarded items up as they accumulated during our regular weekly pickup seemed to work well, both for the Town and for individuals. We haven't tallied the expenses and compared them to last year, but we're fairly certain that we saved money on labor and transportation costs. You can expect a full accounting at the end of the year in the Selectmen's annual report. We'd also like to hear from you to see if this pickup method was more convenient and if you'd like us to continue this way. The net cost to the Town of managing our own solid waste in 2018 was \$27,698, far less per resident than neighboring towns of similar size.

The transition from PERC to Fiberite is nearly complete. We had expected to dispose of all of our municipal solid waste at Fiberite beginning early May, but that has been delayed. By the time you receive this letter, unless there's another unanticipated delay, your weekly trash will be going to Fiberite. Unfortunately, we'll have to make arrangements with the Crossroads

landfill in Norridgewock to arrange for waste from next year's spring cleanup, since Fiberite won't take much of the waste we pick up then. We'll keep you informed.

We still are committed to recycling, and we pick up recyclables on the last Friday of the month. Unity Area Recycling Center still has limited the types of plastics that they can recycle, but some of these plastics that they won't accept can be included in your weekly household trash and recycled right at the Fiberite facility. UARRC has expanded to accept clothing and other similar waste, but you'll have to take it to their site yourself, like you already do with electronics and light bulbs. For more information, please check out <http://www.uarrc.org/> or contact our solid waste director, Tammy McTaggart at greenfreedomme@gmail.com.

Public Works

Our winter roads were well maintained this year, and thanks to careful planning and frugal and attentive use, we still have a portion of salt and sand left over that we can use next year. Thanks to the good work of our Public Works employees, we were able to keep the roads passable and safe.

That said, we've all been frustrated by the conditions of our unpaved roads this mud season. Rapidly rising temperatures over a short period of time, creating freeze-thaw cycles that were very different than usual, and heavy rains made travel on some roads very difficult. Unfortunately, we were forced to close the Mitchell Road for some weeks this spring in order to save the road and for traveler safety. We'd like to remind travelers that these unpaved roads are for traffic, and not to be used as recreational mud runs. That activity causes unnecessary damage and costly repairs. But, in spite of this road closure and some difficult conditions, we can safely say that every house on a public road was accessible by emergency vehicles at all times. By the time you receive this letter, the roads will have been graded and smoothed for the summer.

This summer, maintenance of our unpaved roads will include brush and tree cutting, culvert replacement, ditching, grading, and adding some surface where needed. We also have some shoulder work to complete on the Waning Road. Since one has to drive through either Albion or Unity to get the Waning Road or the Glidden Road, many residents haven't seen the extensive work we did there last year. We urge you to take a little drive and look it over if you haven't done so.

Additionally, we're planning to bring proposed solutions to the Mitchell Road to the Town for a vote at a special Town Meeting. Please be sure to attend this important meeting.

Also, this summer, we'll be paving the Freedom section of the Stevens Road and the Burnham Hill Road as part of our long-range paving plan.

We're happy to report that the ton truck is inspected and in good working order and fully operational. This will save money in that we won't have to use our large dump trucks for jobs for which a smaller truck will do.

Given the Town's history of appropriating around \$10,000 per year for excavator rental, it was voted at the March Town Meeting to authorize the Selectmen to take out a loan for the purchase of one for our Public Works Department. We purchased a 2003 Model C-11 Cat excavator with 4400 hours. It's a wide track zero turn, equipped with 24" flotation pads, auxiliary hydraulics, and a hydraulic thumb. It has an 8' 8" back fill blade, a quick attach 36" digging bucket and a 60" hydraulic swivel quick attach cleanout bucket. Additionally, we purchased a Moog 40' 60,000 plus GVW dual wheel triaxle trailer. The trailer requires some shop repair, but by the time you receive this letter, the trailer will be fully functional and

inspected. As we proposed, we've entered a lease purchase agreement such that the annual cost of renting will be roughly equal to the lease payment. We're pleased to report that after 4 more years, the Town will own this excavator and won't incur any other annual costs except for routine maintenance and repair. In the long term, this will free up tax payers' money that can be used directly on road improvement rather than equipment rental. If you'd like more details about the actual equipment costs and how the financing was structured, feel free to contact one of us.

Skidgel Lot

Some of us may benefit from a very, very brief history of how and why the Town came to own the Skidgel lot.

The Town had approved the purchase of the so-called Allen Blueberry lot, adjacent to the Town Garage lot to provide adequate space to accommodate equipment, expand material storage, and provide space for snow removal. After title work, it was discovered that the lot was indeed owned by Mildred Skidgel. The Selectmen approached her with the same offer the Town had approved, but she declined; she would only part with her property in Freedom as a whole.

Additionally, the Selectmen received various complaints about the unsanitary and unsightly trash blanketing the Skidgel lot. And unfortunately, it had become home to a large number of rats that were disturbing local homes and businesses. It had been subject to a government-mandated cleanup some years earlier, where roughly 400 containers of paints, solvents, and other items that would typically be for sale in any hardware store were removed. After that cleanup, the EPA certified that there was no hazardous waste remaining.

In order to implement the Town's will to purchase the Allen Blueberry lot and address the need for expanded public work space and the necessity of correcting what was an essentially open dump in the center of town, the Selectmen considered four options: direct the owner to clean it up, take the property by eminent domain and have the Town clean it up, purchase the property, or do nothing.

Directing the owner to clean up the lot would have involved declaring it a nuisance, obtaining a court order to clean it up, and if the owner refused, to have the Town create a fund and contract the cleanup. That fund would have to have been created before any action was taken against the owner. The estimated cost of this cleanup would have been over \$160,000, and additional legal costs. The owner wouldn't have been able to pay, the Town would have added these costs to the owner's taxes, and after three years of nonpayment, the Town would have ended up foreclosing on the property. Since the Town would have had a lien on the property that included the cost of the cleanup, and the Town would own the property with a liability of over \$160,000 and additional legal costs. This wasn't perceived to be a viable option.

The Selectmen considered condemning the property and taking it by eminent domain, but this is an unsavory and unpopular practice. Equally undesirable was doing nothing. The problem would have persisted, and the Town would have been left with an open dump in the middle of our village. The Selectmen negotiated with the owner and settled on a price, contingent on the Town's approval. At a special Town Meeting, the purchase was approved.

Since that time, the Selectmen applied for and received an assessment grant to determine whether the property would qualify for a Brownfield grant to clean up the property. The positive outcome of this assessment was that it was determined that it is not a hazardous waste site.

There is no hazardous waste on the property. The negative outcome is that the Town did not qualify for federal grant money to clean it up.

Now that the Town owns the property, it's fair to ask what we should do with it. The Selectmen are considering many options to present to the voters for their approval. Initially, we thought of it as a small business park, and we're still exploring the feasibility of this option. We had considered installing solar panels on the Blueberry portion of the lot to offset the Town's municipal electricity use, but we determined that without the tax incentives that private entities receive, the Town could not make such a project profitable in the long term. We're exploring leasing part of the lot to an energy company that would set up a community solar farm. The advantage to the Town would be a long-term revenue stream for the use of the land which would be used to offset municipal electricity use and to reduce taxes, and the benefits to residents would be an opportunity to participate in the purchase of alternative energy with long term savings and reduced environmental impacts.

The Skidgel lot proper does need to be cleaned up. What can't be burned or recycled can be buried, and we have tentative approval from the Maine DEP to create a one-time burial site as long as it does not exceed one acre right on the property. An expert, who works in concert with the DEP regarding burning wood waste in similar situations, looked at the site last summer and stated that in his opinion, at least half of the material, once sorted, could be burned right on site. What can't be burned or recycled can be buried on site. There is a large concrete slab in good condition, and one possibility is to sell or lease the lot to a business, once again with a financial benefit to the Town, either by expanding our commercial tax base or by returns from a lease.

Last week, we spoke to the Director of the Maine Community Development Block Grant Office in Augusta. We were informed that Freedom may qualify for a grant to pay for the cleanup in a grant category called "Special Projects." Grants from the CDBG Office are not geared to hazardous waste as are EPA grants. Our job now is to write up a narrative about the history of the site, state the Town's goals in cleaning the site, and provide a detailed cost estimate and time frame. Our intent is to get this application completed and submitted as soon as possible.

The Selectmen are always looking for creative solutions and proposals, and we welcome any ideas that the residents may have.

Taxes

The Selectmen will be committing taxes soon after the School referendum. As soon as possible after the Selectmen commit taxes, bills will be mailed. If two of the Selectmen are recalled, this commitment, and consequently the mailing of tax bills, will be delayed. Please remember that at Town Meeting the citizens voted to set a date fixed, October 1, when interest will be charged on late taxes.

Recall

The Clerk has certified petitions calling for the recall of two Selectmen, Ron Price and Steve Bennett, in accordance with the Town's Ordinance for Recall of Selectmen. This matter will be voted on at a June 11 referendum vote at the same time as we consider the school budget.

If only one Selectman is recalled, Town business will continue as normal until a replacement is selected by the voters. If both are recalled, things become a little complex, and voters should know the consequences and the procedures that the Town will have to follow.

In anticipation of this recall the Selectmen have adopted a Disbursement Policy that allows one Selectman and the Treasurer to approve the following payments: payments to the State, payments to the School, and the payment of wages and salaries. Under State law, no other payments may be made by the Town. Since there is no legal allowance for any other payments, residents can expect no utilities to be paid, no fuel to be purchased, no material for road work, and no vendors that serve the town to be paid, for example. In other words, the Town would experience a partial shutdown. We can expect all road work and trash pickup, for example, to cease until the vacancies that arise from the recall are filled.

An election can be held 24 days from the date of the certification of the recall vote. Ten days are allotted for interested citizens to gather petition signatures to be on the ballot, and an additional 14 days before an election can be held. Depending on the practicalities of preparing ballots, advertising and posting, and other administrative details, this may take a few more days than that.

In a nutshell, if one of the Selectmen is recalled, the Town will continue until the vacancy is filled. If both are recalled, the Town will experience a near total shutdown for close to a month.