

Roque Bluffs Board of Selectmen's Update

July 2020

Greetings to you all!

We are amazed at the speed with which things are changing and the uncertainty of what is to come. The stories that we read encourage us to help each other and to be patient as we all try to adjust to whatever the “new normal” is today and what it will become in the near future. We are still wondering what that will be.

We see an ongoing need to communicate and so we have created a second letter to share much information with you. We had positive feedback about our past letter and so we decided to do it again, as there are many important things that we wanted to share with you. It seems that about every three or four months we have news to share. We will try to get something out to you three times a year. If it needs to be more than that, we will adjust. If it is too much, let us know and we will also adjust.

Changes at the Town Hall

A special door at the entrance to the main room was designed and built (at no cost to the town) so that business can be accomplished in a safe manner. Thank you to Bob Miller and Scott Hanscom for this work! It offers everyone protection. We have masks available for those who need them.

We practice social distancing in meetings and use Zoom when possible. We use masks if we must work closely together on a project. We find a sense of humor helps as we adjust to things being different. We find ourselves being pleased when we experience something that is familiar. Truly, Covid-19 has made differences for us all. Thanks to all of you who have adjusted so easily to this. We are happy to see residents helping each other and encouraging each other. Together we will get through this!

Fiber Optic Broadband Progress

Thank you all for your patience with this enormous project. While it might appear nothing is going on, the paperwork to get the construction process started has been continually flowing.

Here is a chronology of what has been happening. In January, we began a more detailed Environmental Review process. January and February were busy months getting all the information together to send to the USDA. The shutdown from Covid-19 cancelled our planned USDA training in Dallas. Later, we did attend five webinars on the topics that would have been covered in Dallas. In March, we received our closing packet – the legal paperwork for the grant. Karen scheduled an appointment at the Machias Savings Bank – then subsequently cancelled due to stay-in-place orders. Our attorney was not available during this time. In April, there were numerous inquiries and requests for documentation from the group completing the environmental review. It took time to resend the documents and answer all of the USDA's questions. In May, Karen sent the closing packet to the attorney and the appropriate documents

to Machias Savings Bank to begin the process of setting up the pledge trust account. In addition, Karen filled out the final forms for the state's Connect ME grant.

June 2nd. We received word that we had successfully completed the Environmental Review! Hallelujah! This was one big hurdle.

June 3rd. We received a check from the State of Maine for \$50,000. We deposited it in the town's account until the USDA account was opened.

June 11th. Philip Pinto and Karen worked with Kate Grossman, the town's attorney, on the documentation in the closing packet. She adapted some of it to fit us specifically since we are a municipality and not a corporation. Philip scanned and entered the signed pages into the official digital document. Scott Hanscom, Karen Miller, Carla Wood, and Philip Pinto signed documents at the Machias Savings Bank to set up the Trust Pledge account and deposited the \$50,000 from the state into the new account.

June 12th. Carla, Philip, and Karen went to the bank and took out the loan for the rest of our 25% match. It is \$250,000 at 2.6% interest for 5 years. By paying monthly, we will save ourselves almost \$3000 in interest over the term of the loan.

June 15th. We received the bank statement required by the USDA that confirmed our balance in the USDA account.

June 16th. Philip scanned and sent more forms to Tim Brooks, our general field representative (GFR), for the grant. The final documentation from the attorney was sent June 22 to the GFR who then sent it on to D.C. We had additional requests for three more documents. They were sent on July 20. Now we wait for the official budget for our project. Once we have that, we believe we can move forward with the pole licensing.

Richard Martin, the accountant assigned to us by the USDA, called to see what questions we had. He was headed into a meeting with the D.C. office and wanted a sense of what needed to be done to help to us. He was very reassuring that this entire process would all work well – despite this morass of paper-pushing.

June 17th. Philip and Karen met with Mark Ouelette and Sara Richardson, the new project manager and engineer, via Zoom. She will be great to work with. She has a good sense of what we need and what must be done. She has a penchant for the kind of detail essential to this project. And she is within our budget! Hiring an engineering firm is a requirement by the USDA. Sara is currently going through the steps to be approved by the USDA.

In this conversation, it became clear that we needed to establish a deadline for households to sign up for the broadband service. We will have a more efficient and cost-effective construction phase if we have confirmed user numbers and their locations.

The New Deadline for Broadband Signup is September 25, 2020

Please call Axiom at 255-0679 and sign up today!

June 29th. Scott, Carla, and Karen had a conference call with Richard Martin, the accountant assigned to our grant. We prepared a long list of documents to send to him on July 10, 2020.

July 1st. The Broadband bulletin board was hung in the Town Hall entry. It will be the center for all information on the Broadband project. We will post updates as we have them.

Our next task will be to interview the construction firm and then make the decision and begin the contract process. This is where we currently are in the process.

We hope to be able to start pole licensing – getting permission to put our fiber on the power poles – in the near future. We anticipate that the build out of the system will begin in the spring of 2021. ***If all goes smoothly, we could complete the job by early fall of 2021.*** Covid-19 has shown us how much we need this system. Remember that the grant, while it slows us down, does provide us with 75% of the project's funds and we do not have to borrow the whole amount.

Referendum to Replace the Town Meeting

Welcome to all our new residents! *Under normal conditions*, we would have an annual town meeting in which we elect officers and vote on the budget articles. Our last two town meetings have included over one hundred participants. However, with the Covid-19 pandemic, safety concerns will make it hard to hold that kind of meeting. We are still under orders to not have more than 50 people in one location and still practice social distancing. That takes a space bigger than we have.

Governor Janet Mills' executive order has allowed us to *temporarily* replace town meetings with a referendum vote to approve our annual budget. However, without a secret ballot voting procedure in place, we cannot vote for our new officials in the referendum meeting. Therefore, our current officials will stay in place until such time as we can have a formal town meeting to elect them.

A hearing to discuss the budget articles must be held at least 10 days *before* the referendum. This hearing can be done by Zoom and will be held on September 1, 2020 at 6:00 pm. Anyone who wants to attend the hearing should send an email to rbwarrants@gmail.com by August 30. Information on how to set up for Zoom meeting will be sent to you from that email.

Rather than lumping all budget elements into one single package, we break our many articles into individual units so that the accounting can be clear as moneys are allocated and spent. This results in transparency for the community. The ballot articles will be written in the same order as the articles appear in the annual report. Assuming all goes well, we hope to have the annual report available in mid-August!

The referendum vote will take place from 10 am to 8 pm – just as we normally do when we vote. Voting will occur in the open Roque Bluffs fire station in order to maintain Covid-19 safety practices. September 15, 2020 will be the date for the referendum. This will be a secret ballot vote on the budget articles. As always, registered voters are eligible to vote. Absentee ballots will not be available. Everyone will have to go to the polls to vote. Ballots will be counted after the polls close. All results will be posted at the Town Hall when the counting is finished.

It is important for us to take action on the budget and move forward. Last year's budget will be insufficient to handle our future expenses for the Broadband project. This referendum method is the best option for us to keep moving forward and not unduly expose any of our citizens to risk.

Gifts to the Town

The new bulletin board purchased with Island Institute grant money, hangs in the entryway of the Town Hall. Make a habit of checking it when you are at the Town Hall. Two new 28" computer monitors for the Town Clerk and the Assessors were donated to the town. We are so thankful for these gifts. Half of the cost of the new fireproof Planning Board file cabinet was also donated.

Web Site for the Town of Roque Bluffs

A Web Site is currently being developed that will be an easily accessible source of important information for and about our community. We hope to have a basic site established and continue to develop it after it goes live in the next few weeks. It will be a work in progress for a while as there is so much that could be put on it. Watch for more information in our next update letter.

AN IMPORTANT REMINDER

Trash pickup has been going relatively well. We just want to remind you that **ONLY HOUSEHOLD TRASH** is eligible for pickup. **NO** furnishings, furniture, or appliances will be picked up. **Trash must be in plastic bags or cans to be picked up.** There can be no loose plastic containers or garbage. We are seeing an increase in the number of cardboard boxes. Boxes must be **flattened** before being set out for pickup. They do not need to be in plastic bags. We thank you for helping help us with this. Your cooperation will keep our costs from increasing. Thank you!

We thank everyone who helped keep our town's essential business going while we labored under Governor Mills' stay-in-place orders between March 19 and June 1. During that time, Carla worked from home and all town calls were forwarded to her phone. Many of us struggled with our limited internet service during that time. We are all looking forward to the time when we have a fast fiber optic system up and running! Everyone working together has made it possible to meet all of our community's needs.

Many thanks to all of you. We want you to stay safe and stay well.

Owen, Scott, and Karen