

Weaving a More Resilient Community

Selectmen's Update February 2021

Volume 1:4

Once again, it is time to share with you the news of the town and our ongoing efforts to make Roque Bluffs a kinder, better, and stronger community. When we last communicated, it was the end of October. Days were growing shorter, temperatures were dropping, and COVID-19 was on the rise in Downeast Maine. December saw a rapid increase in case numbers and, thankfully, the approval of two vaccines that will offer some hope in the midst of this pandemic. For many of us, these conditions of isolation and threat of illness are a serious and emotional challenge. We continue to encourage all of you to stay safe and work to keep others safe as well. Governor Mills encourages us to practice the 3 W's: wear a mask, wash your hands, and watch your distance. That last one requires constant awareness!

At the Town Hall, we continue to avoid those face-to-face meetings that can be accomplished on Zoom or conference calls. As many of you know, this too is also a major challenge given our limited internet options. We are updating our COVID plans each month based on the trends in new case numbers. Since Carla Wood occupies the room eight hours each day for her business activities, we request a limit of only one visitor to the building at a time. We are following Governor Mills' executive order that requires facemasks to be worn in the Town Hall. We all look forward to the day when such guidelines will no longer be necessary!

This pandemic has required so many changes. Progress will come when we appreciate all that we have today, when we reach out to others with kindness and encouragement, and when we treat ourselves kindly in the process. Again and again we hear, "Together we will get through this." That is indeed happening. Please do all you can to keep yourself and others around you safe!

New Training and Policy

Following the advice of Maine's Assistant Attorney General, the Selectmen consulted Kate Grossman, our town attorney, and adopted a new policy that governs the management and maintenance of Roque Bluff's municipal documents. In December, the municipal officials received training on that management from Kate. The training covered those required elements in the new policy. We recorded and archived Kate's virtual session at the Town Hall so that present and future town officers may learn or review those policies and be up to date on their responsibilities.

To comply with this new policy, Carla, Karen and other volunteers have been hard at work (masked of course!) in the process of recovering, filing, and organizing town documents and records into the new filing cabinets. This work is still in progress as we write. Now that Carla has taken on the role of Public Access Officer, she needs to have clear and easy access to all Town public records and legal documents in order to make them available, when requested, to members of the community. With the Town's new policy for management and our new filing cabinets in place, we can now do a better job at providing these services to you. It is likely that we will still need to purchase two more fire-proof cabinets next year in order to meet our legal obligations of openness and access and to protect all of our critical town records. The older records from the Selectmen's

and Planning Board meetings have been labeled, filed, and archived in the Town Hall basement on the new shelves that Scott Hanscom has built for us. Many thanks to Lisa Hanscom, Marcia Ismail, Lynn Sullivan, Lisa Preston and Don Bradbury for all of their hard work to organize and archive the Planning Board documents!

As we work through these organizational challenges, we recognize that there is still a lack of an operations policy for our Town. Such a policy would spell out **what** officials are expected to do in their duties and **how** they should accomplish those. The policy would lead to consistent actions among all officials and improve our ability to be transparent in those actions. We have already started on that path to create that new policy.

We know that as we continue to work with these new policies, we may need to update them and adopt additional changes. We are doing all of this in order to improve clarity of official responsibilities and communication with our constituents and to develop a systematic approach to the management of your Town Hall. We will continue to keep you posted!

Our New Website

Speaking of keeping you posted, the new Roque Bluffs Town website is up and running! It, too, is a work in progress and not yet finished. This website will provide another means of sharing information with you as widely and easily as possible. We are adding all kinds of links and information to it as we think of those things. You can access the website at “roquebluffsmaine.us”. (Note: no spaces!) Created and designed by Philip Pinto, the website can provide different types of information to residents and visitors including state and local forms, announcements, and date reminders. Each Board will continue to enhance their own page (with the help of Philip Pinto and Carla). A calendar on the website will keep you up to date on licensing, meetings, activities and elections. We are all still learning how to work this new mode of communication. Suggestions of how to improve or add to it are always welcome! For those unable to access the internet, **do not worry!** There will always be the paper announcements in the Machias Valley News Observer and on the Town bulletin board.

Electing Town Officials This Summer and the New Process

In our fall referendum, we voted to adopt the “Secret Ballot Format” for electing Town Officials. This change was instigated because many voters requested the ability to cast their votes in private. The present pandemic conditions now require us to create both a safe and secure process for our elections. Carla and Karen participated in a Maine Municipal Association webinar that explained this process according to Maine Law. The manual for this class was a mere 480 pages. (Don’t worry! We won’t ask you to read the manual.)

Last summer, because of the pandemic, we could not safely hold our own elections for officials in our usual public format. Governor Mills’ executive order extended the terms of office for those officials’ who would have been up for reelection until we could develop a process to hold that election safely. Our fall referendum vote to change our voting format gave us that option. You should know that many other Maine communities have already adopted this secret ballot format and have found it to be more open for new candidates and more inclusive of all voters.

The state guidelines for electing officials with this format require a different procedure than what we have done in the past. On March 1st, residents and/or candidates may pick up “Nomination” forms from the Town Office for any person wishing to collect signatures for a candidate. There must be *at least 10 and not more than 25* signatures of Roque Bluffs registered voters collected for each candidate wishing to run for an office. *Each person* running for office – new and old – must sign a “Candidate Declaration” form and have it filed with the Election Clerk (Carla) before or when the nomination papers are returned to the Town Office. Nomination forms and candidate declaration forms must be submitted *in person* to the Election Clerk *no later than 6:00 pm*, April 12, 2021.

In this June election, we will vote for *both* the 2020-2023 candidates who were unable to run last year *and* the 2021-2024 candidates who choose to run this year.

The 2020-2023 officers up for reelection are: Selectperson Karen Miller, Assessor Bob McCollum, and School Committee Member Jade Moody.

The 2021-2024 officers up for reelection are: Selectperson Owen Moody, Assessor Lisa Hanscom, and School Committee Member Barbara Anthony.

This election will be held on June 8, 2021 at the Fire Station.

Update on the Tax Commitment

The Roque Bluffs taxes were recommitted on November 6, 2020. All numbers were accurate and approved by the auditor. The state-required valuation report, the MVR, was submitted December 11, 2020. The 2021 tax bills have gone out. We have received a good response in everyone’s taxes being paid so quickly this year.

Audits

In July 2020, the Town of Roque Bluffs had its annual audit. The preliminary report of the annual audit arrived in November and included three findings that we needed to address. The chair of the Selectmen met with the Board of Assessors *via Zoom* and shared these findings with them. *First*, a Selectperson shall review all cancelled checks. In the past, we have only reviewed bank statements. Scott Hanscom volunteered to assume that task. *Second*, documentation for the Supplementary Tax Bills and Abatements was deemed inadequate. The auditor recommended that we use coupon books for each of the Supplementals and Abatements. Every transaction will now have a numbered coupon with the appropriate information. Accompanying the coupon shall be a copy of a letter of explanation to the taxpayer signed by all members of the Board of Assessors. The Tax Collector will now require both documents before taking any action. This change will keep all supplemental tax bills and abatements transparent and fully documented. *Third*, the auditor recommended that the Tax Collector/Treasurer back up daily all financial information on an external drive. This drive will go home with Carla every evening. All of these changes in Town protocols have been initiated.

Bureau of Motor Vehicles Audit

The BMV audit report arrived in December and directed the Selectmen to more carefully monitor the security of the building and the files that house their forms and documents. We have made those required changes.

Fiber Optic Broadband

In November, the Selectmen decided to enter into a contract with Finley Engineering. This choice was influenced by Finley's 30 years of experience of working with the USDA. Their understanding of processes within the USDA will be invaluable to us. While the stated cost of hiring Finley is more than we budgeted for this component of the Broadband, **both Finley and Axiom believe our allocated moneys will be sufficient, as some components of our engineering budget may have been estimated overgenerously. In December, the USDA approved this engineering contract.**

Pole licensing remains a struggle. We must have licensing agreements with two (not the three that we initially believed) separate companies – each of which owns some but not all of the poles in Roque Bluffs. We are required to have liability insurance to attach our internet wire to these poles – more liability insurance than the Town normally carries. We have spent several months looking for such insurance. The pandemic has impacted the insurance market; now fewer companies are willing to provide liability insurance. However, we have finally succeeded! On February 3, 2021, we secured the necessary insurance to start the pole licensing process. One company also requires a line of credit at Machias Savings Bank for the duration of eight months at no cost to the Town. This incredibly frustrating and detailed process has slowed our forward motion considerably. We are currently waiting for the paperwork from the insurance companies and the pole licensing applications from Versant. Then – *finally* – the pole licensing applications will be submitted to Consolidated and to Versant. We will keep you posted.

New Mailing Address for the Town Hall

We have had recurring difficulties with mail delivery at the Town Hall mailbox. The Selectmen have decided to acquire a Post Office box instead. We have chosen Jonesboro's Post Office for its convenience for Carla and for its cost effectiveness.

The Town's new mailing address is now "**Town of Roque Bluffs, PO BOX 70, Jonesboro ME 04648.**" This change has been working quite well and we have the assurance that our mail is secure.

Extending Our Sympathies

It has been a hard winter of loss for our little community. So many beautiful and wonderful members in such a short time!

It is with deep sadness that we report the passing of Mort Lockett in late December. Mort was instrumental in reopening the Chapel in 2002. Mort loved his men's breakfasts, golf outings, the Blueberry Festival, and Sunday evenings at the Chapel. We send our sympathies to the Chapel's and Mort's families.

Our sympathies go to Marilyn Tenney and her family on the passing of her brother, Walter Morse, in early January. Marilyn and Lawrence worked alongside the Locketts to reopen the Chapel. Walter loved Roque Bluffs! Walter, John Preston, Philip Watts, and later, Bob Sloan worked tirelessly to record and share the history of our town. Both Walter (through Marilyn) and John generously donated documents to the Roque Bluffs Historical Society. Those gifts will be well loved and well-guarded. Who among us doesn't remember Walter driving to Machias in his bright, teal-colored Thunderbird? Stories abound of Walter on his motorcycle!

Ida Preston lost her long-fought battle with cancer in late January. Her positive and optimistic attitude was contagious and an inspiration to all of us. Many of you remember Ida working at Tom's Mini Mart. She loved life and her family was so important to her. She will be missed by all who knew and loved her. All of us extend our sympathies to her husband, Tyrone, and her son, Keegan.

Carolann Beal also lost her battle with cancer on the same weekend that Ida did. She was a very welcoming person. Her soft voice and listening ear made you want to be friends. She and several Roque Bluffs residents worked out at the gym together; they became a close group of friends as well as neighbors. We admired Carolann's determination and effort – even before her illness. These same traits of strength helped her end her days with grace and gentleness. She will be missed by many. We extend our sympathies to Stan and her grandson, Jordan.

Each member of our community contributes to the fabric of its uniqueness. When we lose one person, it surely impacts us all. In the wake of these losses, may we see each other with new appreciation and continue to support each other with kindness. Remember to be kind to yourself, too, as we continue to cope with this pandemic.

Owen, Karen, and Scott