

MALT to showcase Salisbury mill sites

New project to offer exercise, education

By JOHN FLOWERS

MIDDLEBURY — The Middlebury Area Land Trust (MALT) later this year will lift the historic veil on what was a thriving mill industry near Salisbury Village during the 18th and 19th centuries.

It's called the Salisbury Mills project, and it will include a series of walking trails, two crossings of the Leicester River, wayfinding signs and a variety of interpretive materials — all aimed at showcasing sites on an 80-acre parcel where some of the town's earliest settlers harnessed waterpower to fuel thriving cotton, lumber and other industries that have receded into time and decay.

"It's been this quiet, dormant nugget of history that people don't know is even there," said MALT Executive Director Jamie Jo Horton. "I think this is a cool example of environmental and historical conservation intersecting."

It was around two decades ago that Max and Jim Peterson — both avid historians and preservationists — donated the 80-acre parcel to MALT. Much of what's known about the early industrial activities that took place on the property are due to the Petersons' past documentary efforts. Those efforts, according to MALT officials, included compiling oral and written information, curating early photographs, collecting and curating historic artifacts, and writing multiple books focusing on the histories of Otter Creek, Lake Dunmore and the town of Salisbury itself.

The Petersons believed MALT had the capacity and connections to care for the property and open it up to the general public. Under terms of the agreement, MALT owns the property while the Vermont Land Trust was enlisted to conserve it.

But MALT's efforts to publicly showcase the Salisbury Mills property hit a snag.

"It's basically landlocked," Horton explained. "It was very difficult for a long time for MALT to create public access, because



THE MIDDLEBURY AREA Land Trust is getting ready to provide public access to its "Salisbury Mills" parcel, which will offer visitors a glimpse of what was a once thriving industrial complex — generating iron ore, lumber and fabric products — fueled by waterpower. Here we see one of two bridge crossings of the Leicester River that are part of the project.

there was nowhere for a parking lot and nowhere for people to enter the property."

This triggered a lengthy, but ultimately successful, dialogue among adjacent landowners, a public utility and other nonprofits. MALT worked with Green Mountain Power to get a trail easement across its property that will allow walkers access to Salisbury Mills. And the New England Forestry Foundation gave MALT the right to build a nearby parking lot on its land, at the corner of Rogers Road and West Shore Road.

Meanwhile, the town of Salisbury gave permission to build a pedestrian crosswalk across West Shore Road.

"We've had the land for a long time; now, we can finally put in some public access there," Horton said.

MALT officials and volunteers

have been working behind the scenes to make sure Salisbury Mills' amenities were ready to go once access and parking were solved.

"All the physical infrastructure has been built, including the parking lot. All of the trails have been established on the property," Horton noted. "The two (Leicester) River crossings have been created. All of the historical, interpretive sites have been identified. We're now doing the final editing for the interpretive signs; those will be installed during the late spring/early summer."

Horton and her colleagues can't wait to share the property with folks. Plans call for combining the grand opening of Salisbury Mills with MALT's annual celebration, to be set for late August or early September. It will be an education, as well as a nice hike, for visitors.

"I think it's unique in MALT's portfolio, having this incredible historical component. We had to reach outside of our internal network to get the expertise for the archaeological history.

MALT's mission is to connect people with the lands we protect," Horton said. "This parcel is rich in history for the town of Salisbury. It was a booming industrial site that created jobs. It was producing all kinds of iron ore products, had various woolen mills. It was incredible. I think the town of Salisbury has been trying, for some years now, to bring more recreational opportunities to their town, and I think this is a great addition."

She credited all the many partners who've helped make the project happen. They include the Salisbury Historical Society, Salisbury Conservation

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— MALT Executive Director Jamie Jo Horton

ANWSD board eyes next budget steps

By ANDY KIRKALDY

VERGENNES — At a Monday meeting devoted to discussing the 18-vote March defeat of its \$27.2 million spending plan, the Addison Northwest School District Board edged toward presenting a vote on a third budget, possibly one with \$200,000 of cuts, on April 30 or May 7.

The board has asked Superintendent Sheila Soule to present two budget drafts at a board meeting on Monday, April 8. The board could make a decision on a spending plan and a vote date then, or on Monday, April 15.

One draft the board requested could reflect about \$200,000 of reductions, while the other could be a rerun of the defeated \$27.2 million plan. Board members advocated for each of those options at this past Monday's meeting, but none lobbied for deeper cuts.

"We only lost by 18 (votes), so there is some room to navigate and maybe bring down the cost, but there's no appetite for a really big cut," Board Chair John Stroup told the *Independent* on Tuesday.

At Monday's meeting, board members said they'd like to know and then inform the public what deeper cuts might look like if the next budget fails.

"I don't think our community understands what's at stake if we continue down this path," said board member Kristina MacKulin.

Actions taken last week by ANWSD's central office gave a possible preview. Monday's meeting was held with a backdrop of discontent among district teachers and staff, almost three dozen of whom received worst-case

scenario Reduction In Force (RIF) notices on the previous Friday, mostly at the high school.

Soule said in a follow-up email to the *Independent* that it is "less likely" that a budget with around \$200,000 with cuts would result in any program cuts, however. Many or possibly even all of those who received RIF notices could remain with ANWSD, depending on the next vote.

Soule said in a follow-up email it would be "less likely a \$200,000 cut" would affect programs, but at the meeting made it clear the high school would be hard-hit if such a budget were defeated: "There's nothing more (left to do) than cutting programs."

Soule explained the RIF notices were necessary in case ANWSD cannot pass a budget by July 1. If that's the case, ANWSD by state statute must move forward with a budget equal to 87% of its current spending.

Soule said that'd mean cutting \$5.4 million and meeting that target would mean drastic measures

ANWSD must be ready to make. Moves would include deep cuts to most high school departments and their staff, particularly in elective courses and in extracurriculars such as band, chorus and sports.

TOUGH FINANCES

A central problem the board faces remains the district communities' low Common Levels of Appraisals (CLAs). Soaring real estate values have left district towns' grand lists ranging from 70% to 75% of true market value, as determined by the Department of Taxes.

CLAs measure how well grand lists stack up to fair market value. (See ANWSD budget, Page 3A)

"I don't think our community understands what's at stake if we continue down this path."

— Kristina MacKulin

Sparrow Art Supply flies to a new nest

By JOHN FLOWERS

MIDDLEBURY — Downtown Middlebury's Sparrow is leaving its nest, but it's building a new one just a few wingbeats away.

Beth Bluestein, owner of Sparrow Art Supply, confirmed last week her store is relocating from 52 Main St. to a larger and more prominent spot at 44 Main St., where Community Barn Ventures was most recently headquartered. Community Barn owners Stacey Rainey and Mary Cullinane recently moved that business to one of their other enterprises — the Stone Mill, a retail/office/lodging establishment at 3 Mill St.

That relocation opened a prime retail spot at 44 Main St., and Bluestein was happy to fly in with Sparrow. She confirmed a "grand reopening" celebration for Sparrow at its new home on Friday, April 5, from 5-7 p.m.

"When a sparrow outgrows its nest, it starts looking for a new one," Bluestein wrote in a short essay signaling the move. "As luck would have it, we found the perfect next home right up the street from

our old nest, a welcoming space where we are excited to flutter our wings as new and returning friends alike stop in."

As previously reported in the *Independent*, Bluestein (then known as Beth Svenningsen) hatched Sparrow two years ago at 52 Main St. — a downstairs spot under Middlebury Mountaineer. An accomplished painter in her own right, Bluestein found plenty of fellow artists in Addison County, but precious few art supply options. She decided to do something about it.

She discovered the Better Middlebury Partnership's Kick Start program, which offered grants of \$15,000 to \$20,000 to entrepreneurs seeking to fill one of several vacant downtown storefronts. Bluestein was among six hopefuls who secured a Kick Start grant.


She found a nice store space at 52 Main St. and stocked it with an eclectic mix of paint brushes of all sizes, easels, canvases, fine paper, X-Acto knives, bookmaking supplies, printmaking essentials, (See Sparrow, Page 3A)




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Sparrow

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oils, watercolors, storage boxes, sketchbooks, pottery products and more.

Sparrow has also hosted a mini gallery, workshops and other artists' amenities.

Bluestein was thrilled to see folks embrace her business plan. She was doing well but acknowledged a few shortcomings of her 52 Main St. spot. She needed more room, and the stairs access off Main Street presented some prospective clients with what she called "a significant physical challenge."

That won't be a problem at 44 Main St., she noted.

"The move to this location is an exciting new chapter for Sparrow Art Supply, making its offerings accessible to all," she said through a press release.

"When you arrive at our new nest, you'll find high ceilings, large windows and a bright, airy place to ignite creativity in local and visiting artists. While exploring our new store, loyal customers will recognize our staple products and be dazzled by the new selection we're bringing in."

In addition to its current inventory, Sparrow will soon begin carrying Daniel Smith watercolor and gouache, Blackwing pencils

and accessories, and more, she said.

Bluestein also promised "fresh gallery walls" that will showcase "the inspiring art" of local artists.

"We love weaving themes into each show, encouraging artists and attendees to break new ground as they craft and admire works around these imaginative prompts — our new space will continue to be a vibrant hub where all art is celebrated," she said.

For more information about Sparrow Art Supply, go to sparrow-art-supply.square.site.

Reporter John Flowers is at johnf@addisonindependent.com.

ANWSD budget

(Continued from Page 2A)

If CLAs are low, state officials uses them to increase towns' school property tax rates to the level they would be if grand lists were 100% accurate. It does this so that when the state doles out education tax revenues to towns, it does it on an equal playing field.

ANWSD's low CLAs are wreaking havoc with district school tax rates.

The most recently defeated budget actually lowered the district homestead rate from \$1.5411 per \$100 of assessed property value to \$1.5371. But once CLAs were applied, the rates in each town would have increased dramatically if the budget had passed.

The breakdown of the increases would have been about 19% in Ferrisburgh and Panton, 11% in Waltham, 12% in Vergennes, and 14% in Addison, according to usually on-point district estimates.

Thus the problem, according to ANWSD Director of Finance and Operations Elizabeth Jennings, cuts that would make an impact on tax rates would essentially gut the high school. ANWSD officials say reductions are much harder to make at the elementary school level, where there are no electives and more mandates.

According to Jennings, if the board cut \$2 million from the district budget, the average ANWSD homestead tax increase would drop to 11%. Ferrisburgh and Panton would still see increases of roughly 15%.

If the district reduced spending by \$5 million and "decimated the staff" Jennings said, "We'd still be at a 10% increase in Ferrisburgh in taxes."

Board member Nikki Bearor was among those who said many residents are probably still unaware how much low CLAs are affecting the district's homestead rates.

"There's still a misunderstanding in the community in regards to the CLAs," Bearor said. "I don't know how to communicate that any differently or any better. Your taxes are going to go up regardless of what this school budget looks like, and that's not within our control."

It should be noted that those who pay based on their incomes, about two-thirds of homeowners, will not feel the full weight of any increase. In the 2023-2024 fiscal year 6,951 Addison County recipients received an average property tax credit of \$1,634.

DISCUSSION

MacKulin, in lobbying for the same budget, pointed to the 18-vote margin and the consequences of deep cuts.

"If we do what Sheila is talking about (the 87% mandate), why the heck would anyone come live here?" she said. "And that's what we're working towards, to make a vibrant school, keep a vibrant school, so people will want to move here, so we'll get more students, so we can continue to have our awesome staff here."

Not all board members agreed with the level budget approach.

Chris Kayhart said the March 26 revote turnout was strong, and suggested the board had to listen to the voters.

"A failed vote means cuts," Kayhart said. "And I don't think it should be \$2 million. I don't think it should be \$5 million. But the voters are asking for something."

Board member Mark Koenig differed, citing the week-long turnaround before the last vote as "problematic," even if well intentioned. Soule and the board were hoping to avoid sending out RIF notices by an April 1 deadline.

"There are a lot of people out there who didn't bother to get off their butts and vote," Koenig said, adding he'd heard from people who were willing to promote a yes vote this time, while "cutting is not going to change those (opponents') minds."

Board members talked about the difficulty of getting the message out about the consequences of further defeats and of the CLAs' impacts. Mike Kane said the board could encourage word of mouth because informational meetings, visiting town selectboards and website posts had been ineffective.

"If we can get a lot of folks out there talking about things in positive ways, I think that would help," Kane said.

Bearor said some voters might have wanted to offset taxes with a surplus that, when available, is dedicated to an Education Stabilization Fund, which auditors recommended to protect the district from a deficit caused by unexpected emergency expenses. The board would have put \$497,000 into the fund if the budget had passed on March 26. But the board and administrators agreed it's critical to protect the district.

"Some education about the purpose of that fund and why it's there might also be helpful,"

Bearor said.

Stroup added voters had also already approved \$1.2 million in other surplus funds to be used for needed work to district buildings.

Student board representative Quincy Sabick was among those who said the board should make it clear how much harm deep cuts could do to VUHS.

"Those are not scare tactics," Sabick said. "Those are reality bullets."

Board member Amy Kittredge had the last word. She addressed staff members:

"I just want to say we're really sorry. This is a terrible position to be in, and we wish contracts could be signed right now."

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MALT

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Commission, New England Forestry Foundation, Vermont Land Trust, MALT and GMP.

She gave a special shout-out to a key person who's helping Salisbury Mills project across the finish line: Merle Schloff. He spent many years making high-quality furniture at a historic blacksmith's shop and mill in Salisbury. He became fascinated with his adopted town's industrial history.

Horton recalled her first encounter with Schloff, a powerfully built, salt-of-the-earth guy whom *Independent* profiled two years ago.

"He marched into my office one day ... and said, 'I want to see MALT bring this project to fruition. Every MALT director I've spoken to hasn't been able

to do it; this is my last attempt,'" Horton recalled with a chuckle. "This project would not have come to fruition without him. He's so passionate about digging up the history and has spearheaded a lot of the physical labor."

In other recent MALT news, the organization announced:

- Creation of an endowment fund, seeded with \$50,000, that'll help the organization move more nimbly in pursuing future conservation projects. The Vermont Community Foundation will manage the fund.

- "It's a major step in the maturity of this organization," Horton said.

- A growing staff. When Horton joined MALT in 2017, it had 1.5 staff positions. It now has four, including new education manager Rachel Klatzker. She will oversee

all MALT's youth and adult education programming.

- Liam Hickey, MALT's trails & volunteer coordinator, has started a new "volunteer trail program" on Thursdays for the Trail Around Middlebury, known as the TAM.

- The scheduled launch this fall of a new, free program for middle school students. The program is currently funded by a United Way of Addison County grant and that will provide a safe and productive afterschool setting where youth will plan trail projects, learn to use hand and power tools and "make much-needed improvements to sections of the TAM closest to Middlebury Union Middle School.

- A new, larger office in the Marble Works, where the organization has been based in a smaller spot for a dozen years.

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