

The Roxbury Report

Volume XI Issue I

March 2014

School Tax Update

BY JIM ROUSMANIERE, JR

A year ago voters in the Monadnock Regional School District voted overwhelmingly to revise the formula under which taxpayers in the multi-town district are billed for school costs. At the time, many people expected that the formula change would mean, among other things, that Roxbury's school tax bills would shrink measurably because the old formula had hit Roxbury (the district's smallest town) harder than all other communities in the school district.

But those expectations didn't materialize. The local school portion of Roxbury residents' next property tax bills ultimately declined -- but only by a comparative smidgen.

The surprise was due to a couple of factors, neither of which had to do with the actual tax formula. For one, the town of Sullivan exited the school district sooner than had been expected, meaning that most of the roughly \$1.3 million in annual local school

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The New Nye Hill Farm

A labor of love



The new barn at Nye Hill Farm

PHOTO: ALICE FUNK

BY ALICE FUNK

Anthony Kline, long-term resident of a Boston suburb, always wanted to have a farm. A couple of years ago, when he turned 49 he said to his wife, Deb, who shared his dream, "It's now or never!" Their goal was to find a farm by the time he turned 50, and they missed that by only 5 or 6 days. Chris and Marie Kaufer

put the Nye Hill Farm on the market with mixed feelings. They loved this piece of land on Middletown Road and the house that they had lovingly and painstakingly restored during more than a dozen years. They were very involved in the Town's affairs, Marie being a supervisor of the checklist and Chris becoming a selectman. But the time had come in their lives to move closer to their children and grandchildren. They wanted to find owners who would love and

care for their property as much as they had. When one owns property as old as this, there is a sense that one is a caretaker in a long chain of stewards. The feeling is that all previous dwellers of the house are watching and hoping that the tradition of love for the land will be carried on. Nye Hill Farm was established by Nathan Nye in 1790. By 1850 Nathan's son, Gardner Nye, had built the farm up to include a herd of "milch cows, work-

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The Roxbury Connection

Roxbury Tree Named National Champion

BY HENRY V. TAVES

The largest Carolina silverbell tree in America grows in Roxbury! Not common in New England, the silverbell's best feature is its white bell-shaped flowers in the Spring. The latest edition of the Register of Big Trees, published by the conservation organization American Forests, lists the silverbell tree at Westover Farm on Dillingham Road as the reigning national champion. The previous champion, in the Great Smoky Mountains National Park, evidently died. Determining the "biggest" tree depends on the height (in feet), circumference at breast height (in inches), and spread of the branches (in feet). The three numbers are added together to produce the tree's "points". The Roxbury tree is 68 feet high, 129 inches circumference, and spreads 66 feet. The runner up, in Rochester,



A branch of a Carolina silverbell tree.

New York, is taller at 104 feet, but with a smaller circumference of 96 inches and spread of 36 feet. Roxbury comes out 5 points ahead.

The previous champion had been 116 feet tall, 152 inches circumference, and spread 43 feet.

The silverbell, *Halesia carolina*, is a southern tree mostly found in the Carolinas, Georgia, and Alabama. However, it

can grow in colder climates and was planted as an ornamental tree in many other states. The Roxbury tree was planted by either Thomas Dillingham or Fred Dearborn.

Each state has a Big Tree program. The UNH Cooperative Extension office manages New Hampshire's. If you know of an especially large tree on your property or elsewhere, you can check the list and see if it might be worth nominating. If so, you can contact the Big Tree coordinator.

Find the state program on the Web at: extension.unh.edu/Trees/NH-Big-Tree-Program. The national list is at americanforests.org/our-programs/bigtree.

The silverbell joins seven other national champions that reside in New Hampshire: sweet birch, gray birch, American mountain-ash, pitch pine, eastern white pine, black spruce, and staghorn sumac. ♦

The Roxbury Report

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Submit news, stories and story ideas to editor@roxburyreport.net.

ROXBURY TOWN MEETING

TUESDAY, MARCH 11

POTLUCK SUPPER STARTS AT 5 PM

VOTING STARTS AT 6 PM

TOWN MEETING STARTS AT 7 PM

Notes from the Selectmen

Here's a brief summary of what's happening as of February, 2014:

- The Roxbury Selectmen would like to thank Dick and Betsy Gilcreast for their wonderful gift to our town this year. They donated back to the Town the original steeple from the Roxbury Church. It was salvaged many years ago when the church was demolished and has been sitting on the Gilcreast property serving as a utility shed. It is now temporarily sitting in front of the upper cemetery until we decide on a permanent location for it. We would also like to thank the volunteers who helped organize and participated in the moving of the steeple.
- The Selectmen's office has accomplished a few interesting projects this year, and we are currently working on a few new projects. The archiving of our historical records has been accomplished. Thank you to the volunteers who helped with the project. We also accomplished the organization, inventory and storage of our many maps that have been rolled up to the ceiling for years. Our town maps now occupy a 15-drawer map file.
- The Selectmen attended a meeting

with the Department of Transportation regarding work to be done on Route 9 between Granite Gorge and the Sullivan General Store. The two major changes to this stretch of road are the replacement of the failing stone retaining wall just past the Gorge and a new bridge near the Sullivan General Store. Several options are still on the table and can be viewed at our office any Monday night. Some of this work may start in 2014. Those of us who live on the north end of town will be experiencing some delays in travel.

- It has come to the Selectmen's attention that a 60-acre wooded parcel of land in Roxbury may be for sale. This is a back lot with no usable road frontage. The Selectman are looking into possibly purchasing this land as a town forest to help preserve the rural character of our town.
- The Selectmen were visited by Henry Underwood, who is an intern at the Southwest Region Planning Commission, who is working on the NH broadband Mapping and Planning Program. The program's purpose is to improve broadband access and use in the state by as-

sessing broadband availability. We reviewed the maps that were sent with Henry, and he accepted our information regarding where broadband was available in our town. If you would like to help with the program, then go to the website -- <http://www.swrpc.org/broadband/> -- and do a speed test. Apparently, the more people who participate in the program, the better the feedback will be which increases the success of obtaining more broadband for ours and other towns.

- We have begun the first steps to construct a shed roof over our road sand area and the existing salt shed. Some money was appropriated and put in a capital reserve account for this project at town meeting. Most of the materials for this project may be donated from several local residents and actual construction could be also done by volunteers to save on costs. Anyone interested in helping with this project should contact the Selectman.

Your Selectmen:

Chip Drogue

Karen Cota

Gerry Davis

Don't miss the

POTLUCK SUPPER

immediately before the Town Meeting

TUESDAY, MARCH 11 at 5 p.m.

Bring a plate, utensils and a dish to share.



The brewery in early days



A greenhouse



Vegetables growing last summer

Photos by
Alice Funk

Nye Hill Farm

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ing oxen and other cattle and swine." In that year the farm produced 20 bushels of wheat, 50 bushels of Indian Corn, 40 bushels of barley and 300 bushels of "Irish Potatoes." Additionally, 200 apple trees yielded 100 bushels of apples, and 40 tons of hay were harvested. Today Deb and Anthony Kline are committed to revitalizing Nye Hill Farm as a diversified, ecologically viable, economically sustainable farm.

The Klines hired a farm manager who is extremely knowledgeable in the field of organic, sustainable farming as well as being a master carpenter. Other staff include a full time intern from the WWOOF program (World Wide Opportunities on Organic Farms, which is an organization that assists those who would like to work as volunteers on organic farms internationally), a Roxbury resident with animal husbandry, construction and farming skills, and other contractors. Together with family members they have coordinated

the planting of a multitude of fruit trees and berry bushes, constructed many large beds for vegetable growing, enriched the soil, established seven bee hives for pollination and honey, erected a large seasonal greenhouse and cold frames with a washing shed currently underway behind them, established inoculated logs for mushroom cultivation and designed irrigation for all of the areas. One of the Klines' sons, who is trained in stone masonry, rebuilt existing stone walls and new walls and steps.

As there was no existing barn when the Klines bought the property, work was begun on a large post and beam structure, made primarily with logs cut from four acres of the property and milled locally, that would house animals for manure production, which is critical to sustainable agriculture. Currently they have small flocks of Shetland sheep and egg laying chickens as well as four American Guinea Hogs. These are out grazing between the vegetable and fruit areas during the growing season. In addi-

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tion the barn will house a pottery studio where Deb will use her skills, a brewery for beer, hard cider and wine production, and an open "community gathering" area. There is a spiral staircase leading up to a cupola complete with benches for resting quietly and taking in the beautiful view.

The brewery is poised to take off soon. Roxbury's Zoning Board and Planning Board have approved the use, design and potential impact to our community. The Klins have a New Hampshire State license to operate a nano-brewery, which limits production and sales amounts. Here's how the farm's business plan puts it: "We intend to market our produce and product locally. Those markets will include local restaurants, the Monadnock Food Co-op, the Keene Farmer's Market, and New Hampshire's Farm to School program. We also anticipate establishing and running a farm stand at the farm. Specific to our beer, excepting the Farm



to School Program, the target markets are the same, with the addition of retail outlets such as Brewtopia in Keene. We do anticipate on-premise sales of beer. In compliance with the nano-brewery license restrictions, those sales will be "on-premise for off-premise consumption". Already the Farm sells vegetable produce to Luca's, "21", and Fireworks restaurants in Keene. Anthony intends to cultivate fields of barley and rye along with the hops now being grown to create a beer

entirely from the Nye Hill Farm. Anthony says that this farm and community are "beyond what he had hoped". There is a deep understanding in this area of the worth of locally raised food and protection of open space for wildlife and agriculture. He says that when a community

values locally grown food it encourages others to put farmland back into production. In turn this develops local food security. "As a diversified, natural, sustainable farm, we are committed to providing the healthiest, highest quality produce while honoring our respect for the land we

steward. We believe those are mutually beneficial commitments. We aspire to the principles and practices of holistic care. We believe that good farms are spiritual places and that good farmers are honorable men and women whose hard work and sense of community personify agriculture and set it apart from agribusiness." Meanwhile, both Anthony and Deb are having the time of their lives bringing this farm back into production. Anthony says, "It's just a hoot!". ♦

A Possible New Life for Remnant of God's Barn??

An artifact from the 19th century Roxbury Meetinghouse, a structure that during its years of use was known lovingly as "God's Barn," may find a new life in town. The Selectmen have been mulling the idea of planting the steeple of that former structure, which for more than a century stood at the upper end of Middletown Road, on top of current town hall at the lower end of the road.

The structure was built in 1849, replacing the original meetinghouse that had been built in 1804; it was the construction of that first meetinghouse that led to Roxbury's incorporation in 1812. The Congregational Society used the building as a place of worship through the 1930s, after which it began to fall into disrepair. It was the last building standing in Roxbury Center village until vandals all but finished it off in the late 1950s. Roxbury voters then decided to dismantle it. At the time of the demolition, then Selectman Bill Yardley took note of the fact that the steeple remained intact, and he asked his neighbor, Seaver Gilcreast Sr., whether he

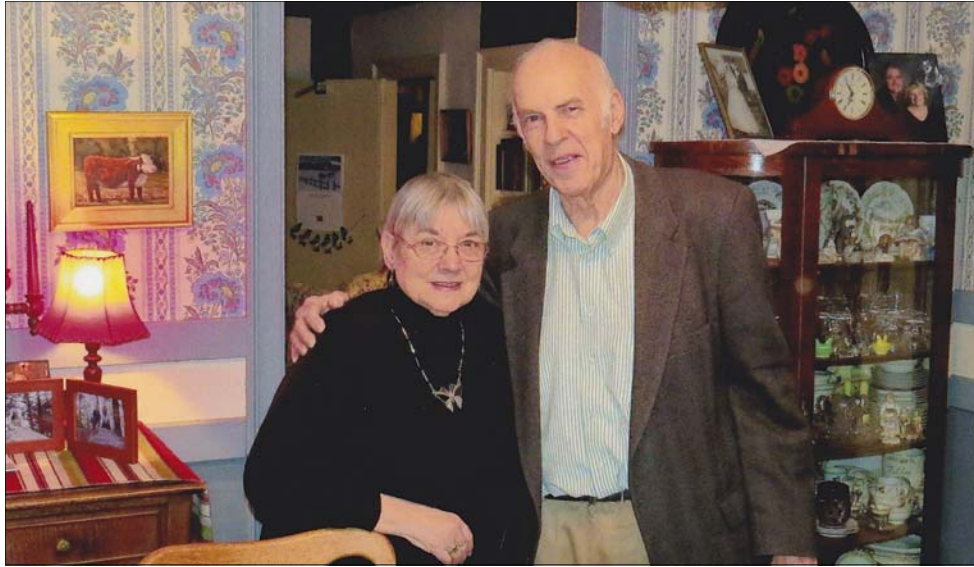


A rendition of the proposed change

had any interest in it. That's how the last remaining part of the old building was saved and put to new use – as a summer playhouse for children. Recalls Seaver ("Dick") Gilcreast Jr., "We put in windows and painted it. It's still in good shape." A month or so ago, a team of volunteers moved the steeple from the Gilcreast property to a holding space near the upper cemetery; the shift occurred as the Gilcreast property was being prepared for sale.

Recently, the Selectmen have been getting bids for the project, which will be discussed during the town meeting. In order to put the steeple on top of the Town Hall, it would require some structural changes to the building. Some of those changes would entail adding some additional space across the front of the building for support, which would give us two rooms that we already need: a handicapped-accessible bathroom on the main floor – and a storage room for tables and chairs. It would also give us a full cellar for future expansion. This will be discussed during the Town Meeting on Tuesday.

Man with a Camera: Seaver 'Dick' Gilcreast, Jr.



Dick and Betsy Gilcreast

BY JIM ROUSMANIERE

Of all the people who had a hand in Roxbury's delightful Bicentennial celebration in 2012, one more than any other assured that those looking back on the event – whether today or a century from now -- will know what it all looked like. Seaver (Dick) Gilcreast Jr., camera always at the ready, photographed the Branch Road parade and the subsequent festivities under the tent on August 18, 2012, and he assembled a photographic record of the associated archive and artifacts display in town hall; on the following day he took pictures of guided tours of local granite quarries; later, he recorded the installation of the Bicentennial time capsule, and, months before the celebration, he was the principal photographer for the town's Bicentennial book.

The quality of what Dick figures to be more than 300 Bicentennial-related images confirms that he didn't just pick up a camera last year. Indeed, the chronicler of our Bicentennial has a long history behind the lens, in addition to some other interests, such as building race cars and airplanes, that, consistent with Dick's generally reserved demeanor, tend to surface as almost incidental asides in an interview.

Dick also has a long personal history with the town, through family ownership of the early 19th century center-chimney Charles Holman house on Horse Hill Road,

and also through service on Roxbury's planning board: He served two long stints beginning in 1976, and he helped draft the town's first master plan in 1982. Along the way, he developed a feel for local history; he's written about the town's past for this publication, and he penned a sketch of Roxbury's history for the Bicentennial book.

Dick and his wife Betsy recently moved to Peterborough, prompting the Roxbury Report to offer its own sketch of Dick, now 80, who will always be a part of our town.

The family first arrived in town a century ago when Dick's great aunt and uncle, who lived in New Jersey, acquired the Holman property for summer use. Dick's parents took ownership in 1958, in retirement, and Dick moved to the property in 1972 after he left teaching in Massachusetts.

His interest in cameras preceded the move. When at Williams College, he started doing freelance photography. On his graduation in 1956, he served for two years as a photographic assistant to the Blue Angels, the Navy's flight demonstration squadron, in Pensacola, Fla., where he took airborne shots of F11F-1 Tigers and F9F-8 Cougars screaming across the skies.

Visiting home in Southborough, Mass. following his military service, he was asked if he'd like to fill in as a teacher at the Fay School, a private grade school in town. The position had appeal. He'd majored in the sciences at Williams, and

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wound up starting a science department at the school. The association lasted: "I filled in for 13 years," he recalled.

He left teaching essentially to get back to photography. "I decided I wanted to get back to cameras before I got too old," he said.

He freelanced, and in fact continued shooting photos for the school until two years ago, and he also took on a wide range of other projects, including national bicentennial work for U.S. News & World Report in 1976, and also Yankee Magazine. He photographed air shows in Manchester and Portsmouth, and worked on regional subjects that included aerial photography – a specialty that led him to take

flying lessons as a precaution in the event his pilot ever became incapacitated ("I can land a plane if I have to.") He also started a line of photographic cards that are locally available.

Running alongside his camera work – in fact, even preceding that interest – was an impulse to build things. As a 12 year-old he built an 8-foot sailing pram that he took out on Silver Lake, and he once harbored the idea of studying marine architecture at MIT. He ultimately found an outlet in building race cars that competed on Sports Car Club of America tracks in the Northeast. The vehicles, which could hit speeds upwards of 180 miles per hour, won a couple of top awards. He also took his design and assembly interests to aeronautics, specifically

building from scratch a replica of the Gee-Bee R1, a plane that in 1932 set the world land-plane speed record of just under 300 miles per hour. The original won a world championship with Jimmy Doolittle, the aviation pioneer, at the controls. Dick, along with a team of four other older fellows (they called themselves "the geriatric builders"), spent nine years on the project; the plane is on view today at the New England Air Museum in Windsor Locks, Ct. There's no current building project in the works – Dick devotes his creative time principally to photography – but that's not to say the impulse isn't there. During an interview, he was asked whether there was anything else he would build if he had the chance. He replied, "Well, you name it." ♦

(Roxbury Taxes, Continued from page 1)

taxes that that town had been paying now had to be shouldered by the six remaining members of the district (in addition to Roxbury, those towns are Fitzwilliam, Troy, Swanzey, Richmond and Gilsum.) There are fixed costs associated with schools – the costs of maintaining buildings, for example – that don't fall when enrollment drops a little, hence some of what Sullivan had been paying to the district became the remaining towns' responsibility. Additionally, state aid to the Monadnock School District declined (something that happened across the state), meaning that local taxpayers had to make up the difference.

Still, the formula change did lead to modestly lower school tax bills for Roxbury taxpayers. But the drop wasn't close to what town officials had hoped back in March, 2013. Expectations had been that the town's overall tax rate would fall by \$2 per \$1,000 assessed valuation; the final drop was half that size.

Here are some numbers: Roxbury property taxpayers previously paid a total tax rate of \$22.85 per \$1,000 assessed valuation of their homes and land; of that sum, the largest component (\$15.62) represented local school taxes, in addition to \$2.60 in state school taxes. When our property tax bills came out late in 2013, taxpayers saw that the local school tax rate dropped to \$14.93 per \$1,000 assessed valuation; meanwhile, the state school tax went up 14 cents, to \$2.74; the overall tax rate wound up at \$21.85.

In 2013 Roxbury paid about \$520,000 in local school

taxes. Were Sullivan still part of the school district, the tax formula change would have dropped Roxbury's overall local school tax bill to about \$430,000. Instead, with Sullivan out of the game entirely, Roxbury's school tax payment dropped only to just about \$500,000.

For the record, here are the old and new tax formulas: OLD FORMULA: Each town's local school taxes were based 75 percent on how many students the town sent to Monadnock District schools and 25 percent on the total assessed valuation of properties in the town. Under that formula, Roxbury paid \$19,494 per student in the district; on the other end of the scale, Troy paid \$4,788 per student. NEW FORMULA: Each town's local school taxes are based 50 percent on how many students the town sends to Monadnock District schools and 50 percent on the total assessed valuation of properties in the town. (Roxbury still wound up with the highest per-student costs in the district, but not by nearly the dimensions of the old system)

Still, there is some comfort in all this. Referring to the change in the district tax formula that was voted through last March, town Treasurer David Jewett said, "If we hadn't done what we did, our taxes would have gone up." It should be noted that the legality of the 2013 tax formula change is being challenged in court, principally by the town of Troy. Roxbury, among other towns in the district, has argued in court filings that the formula change was perfectly legal. The suit is being handled in Cheshire County Superior Court, and the progress is being followed by The Keene Sentinel. ♦

Briefs of interest

A New Police Chief for Roxbury



Robert O'Connor, a broadly experienced police man, has settled into the position of Roxbury Police Chief, succeeding Gary La Freniere, who stepped down Dec. 31 after twelve years on the job.

Chief O'Connor, 44, is a Connecticut native who moved to the region in 1995. He has 20 years of policing behind him with various local perspectives. He's been in state liquor law enforcement, and is currently a member the Swanzey Police Department. Until his appointment in Roxbury, he also served as a part-time sergeant in the Nelson police force. It was while working in liquor law enforcement that he got to know Chief La Freniere, and when he heard of the latter's plan to step down, he expressed an interest in the job.

He lives in next door Keene, and so he brings some understanding of Roxbury to the job. "It's a great community. I look forward to staying on a long time," he says.

Wildlife Survey?

We recently bought a tract of land and wondered what critters call it home. When I looked at the New Hampshire Fish and Game Nongame and Endangered Wildlife website (go to: www.wildlife.state.nh.us and click on 'wildlife') to check maps of wildlife found in Roxbury, I found that our town is not well represented. We have a pretty extensive list of wildlife we have found on our current

property (this includes mammals, reptiles, amphibians, insects, fish and birds) and are interested in building a list for the new property. I decided to see if there was interest in creating a database of wildlife for our town. If you have a birding list or list of other wildlife that you've kept and would like to have the information added to a Roxbury wildlife database please send it to me and we'll compile the information and put it on the website and send it to Fish & Game.

We could get an informal group of interested people together to help create the list and look at wildlife and other conservation efforts in the town. If you are interested in joining such a group let me know.

Send your information to me at: abodwell@hughes.net

— Amy Bodwell

Broadband for Roxbury?

As most people in rural areas know, access to the Internet isn't uniform. Internet users who live or work in cities can download large amounts of digital information such as movies with ease, whereas users who live on country roads – including parts of Roxbury – sometimes have to wait hours to receive certain kinds of information, if they can receive it at all. This discrepancy in communications technology is behind an effort to improve Internet connectivity in rural places. During the last several months representatives of a big statewide campaign to improve the situation have been talking with our selectmen, principally to get a grip on where Internet speeds are high and where they are low in town.

An intern with the Southwest Region Planning Commission has been working to build a map of Internet connectivity in Roxbury that will help inform what's called the New Hampshire Broadband Mapping and Planning Program at the University of New Hampshire. The idea is that this will lead to improvements.

Henry Underwood, the Planning Commission intern, explained: "Just about

everybody (in Roxbury) gets Internet service. It's a question of what quality of service."

Individual residents can help build the data base by sharing information about the quality of their Internet service through a short speed test at the following address: <http://www.iwantbroadbandnh.org/speed-test>.

Internet users can also fill out a survey: <http://www.iwantbroadbandnh.org/broadbandsurvey>

Four Corners Park Update

Anyone who passed by the Four Corners Park during the warm weather surely noticed how well-maintained that community landmark has been. The shrubs were healthy, and the lawn was green and mowed. "I'm happy with the way it's holding up," said selectman Chip Drogue. The park at the corner of Middletown and Branch Roads is the product of a substantial community effort that was sparked by Betty Walker following the death of her mother Madeline Robinson in 2004; more than once had her mother mentioned that the patch of land, for years scrubby and dry, did not present Roxbury's best face to passersby.

A committee of energetic citizens responded to Betty's mention of her mother's thoughts, and in 2007 they put muscle, money and design sensitivities to work in transforming the park to what it is today – a showcase of Roxbury granite, and a green welcome to all who come upon the spot. At the Town Meeting last March, voters approved spending \$500 annually keep the park maintained. TruGreen, a Nashua-based lawn care service company, handled the fertilizing, and Justin Frazier of Troy took care of the mowing. There's a family tie in the latter arrangement in that Justin is the son and stepson of Roxbury's Robin and Ken Buffum. Roxbury town treasurer David Jewett, commenting on the park's maintenance, said, "We get a good return for not very much money."