

RHS REPURPOSING PROJECT 2023 Town Report
Submitted by Kathryn Schenkman and Vic Ribaudo

Below is a listing that highlights the RHS Repurposing Committee's progress in 2023:

Environmental Assessment (BRELLA) Update: Phase 1 of the BRELLA assessment was completed in March and a report provided to the Town. In May, the project was awarded \$32,000 in funding for a Phase II site investigation from the Dept. Economic Conservation (DEC), with funding from the EPA that required a Site Specific Quality Assurance Project Plan (SSQUAPP). The scope of work was submitted by contractor VHB to DEC and approved. Phase II work of testing and sampling began in September, and a report will be available on completion. To date we have received a total of \$48,377 in BRELLA funding.

Removal of HS Underground Fuel Tank: In July, Superintendent Jamie Kinnarney met with Committee members, Sarah Wraight of Two Rivers Ottauquechee Regional Commission (TRORC), and RSUD Facility Adviser Lyall Smith to discuss alternatives to the cost prohibitive \$175,000 quotes for installing an interim above ground exterior fuel tank. The high cost is due to the need for a large double walled tank with sensors built on a concrete pad, and the need for a heater for an above ground oil line to building. Everyone agreed to the impracticality of this investment, which would likely be temporary, as we do not expect to be heating the repurposed building primarily with oil.

Sarah Wraight advised that if the underground tank currently in use is not removed now, and the sub-tank soil not examined by the environmental consultants, then the state could issue a "Certificate of Completion" with an exclusion of possible tank leakage. She confirmed that the state determined TRORC can use their funds to cover the cost of tank removal at this time, but could not guarantee these funds will be available at a later date when the project is ready to remove the tank.

If the underground tank removal is delayed until such time as a new heating system is installed, and oil is found to have leaked from the HS tank, the state will force the owner to clean it up. Therefore the current or any future property owner would be liable for cleanup of oil. Therefore, if the Town acquires the HS building, a clause in the purchase and sale agreement is needed that RSUD would be responsible for tank removal and any required cleanup. Kinnarney agreed that the RSUD would assume that responsibility, stating 3 underground tanks were removed from school properties in the last year, including the Rochester Elementary School, with no oil leakage found.

The Rochester SB and the RSUD were informed and agreed to Kinnarney's request that Phase 2 soil examination proceed without the installation of an interim above ground oil tank; that removal of the underground tank currently in use will be delayed until a new heating system is in place, and RSUD will assume the cost of the eventual tank removal, and liability for any potential site clean up.

Floodway resolved/Floodplain mitigation update: The location of the property in the floodway has been resolved by a boundary adjustment; and an approved waiver obtained for any wastewater permit for the boundary adjustment. Dubois & King engineer Andy Hoak submitted floodplain mitigation design proposals, paid for with remaining funds from our original \$50,000 VT Community Development Board (VCDB) planning grant. In September, Committee members met with Jamie Kinnarney and Andrew Hoak with a consensus on option 3 of the submitted proposals. RSUD approved covering the entire cost. Kinnarney expects the installation work will be completed by January 2024.

HS Winter Heat Drive: In September 2022 the Repurposing Committee launched a RHS winter heat fundraising drive that by April 2023 raised \$12,426, for a total amount of \$27,436 in raised heat funds. The fundraising drive hosted numerous events including: tables at Harvest Fair and the PHCC Winter Market, an all-day Holiday Jumble at the Hancock Town Hall, a WRVP benefit variety show entitled "*Turn Up the Heat*," and letters of appeal. Committee members have paid for the purchase and installation of heat sensors that will help to monitor and conserve energy during the winter months.

Establishment of nonprofit entity: In June, members of the Committee participated in a meeting with VT Law School (VLS) faculty via the VLS Community Navigator Pilot Project on the incorporation process, including creation of Bylaws and Articles of Incorporation, and IRS filing for 501 (c) (3) tax-exemption

status. The Valley Hub, Inc. (VHI) nonprofit is established and Committee members are currently working with an attorney, paid with private funds, to finalize VHI Bylaws and the IRS filing of a 501 (c) 3 application. VHI board development is in progress.

State Delegation Reception: In April members of the RHS Repurposing Committee worked with PHCC and the Town to host a public reception for VT State delegation at PHCC that included public outreach, facility set up and clean up, and homemade refreshments. The purpose of the presentation was to heighten awareness of government funding opportunities to the more rural areas and included: Secretary Lindsay Kurrle (ACCD), Abbie Sherman (Executive Director, VEPC), Comm. Josh Hanford (DHCD), Dep. Commissioner Brett Long (DED), Stephanie Smith (Vermont Emergency Management), Todd Eaton (Agency of Transportation), Sec. Julie Moore (Agency of Natural Resources), Commissioner Jennifer Fitch (BGS), Catherine Deleno (Dept of Libraries), Sec. Anson Tebbetts (Agency of Agriculture).

HS Building Clean up: In June, members of the Committee led an extensive high-energy effort to clean up the HS building in preparation for the summer residency program of Green Mountain Suzuki Institute (GMSI) that began on July 9, and the Summer Music for Kids Program.

Congressional Directed Spending: Senator Sanders supported the project with a Congressionally Directed Spending earmark that passed the Senate Appropriations Committee, as reported to the Committee by Will Stevens. The funding is not guaranteed until the Congress passes the bill. If received, this funding would go toward the estimated \$3.1 million projected cost of building upgrades.

Repurposing Committee Retreat: In July, the Committee held a retreat in which we reviewed the project to date, defined the steps going forward, and identified which committee members would work on which phase. Areas of development include: Development of the VHI, Public education in preparation for the vote, Preliminary Architectural Plan, completion and installation of floodplain mitigation design, securing of tenant commitments, ongoing search of anchor tenants, and NEPA compliance completion.

Planning Grant Extension: Nathan Cleveland, ACCD Community Development Specialist, emailed that VCDB approved our request for an additional \$10,000 to our original \$50,000 planning grant to cover architectural work, approved by Commissioner Alex Farrell and ACCD Secretary Lindsay Kurrie.

NEPA Compliance: Yvonne Benney Basque from VT Dept. of Housing and Community Development sent an approved Section 106 Preliminary Review Form from Historic Preservation, approving our request for a waiver from Historic Review.

Acquisition Vote: In order to meet the mandated advance notice period to schedule the acquisition vote, and assure the availability of the Phase II report, and confirmation of Congressional funding, the acquisition vote will be scheduled after the Annual Town Meeting. Should the Town vote to acquire the building, the property tax increase to cover \$60,000/yr is projected by the Rochester Finance and Budget Committee to be \$60.00 per \$100,000 of assessed property value per year.

Public Outreach: The Committee created a *Current Facts Card* about the project that was distributed at the Harvest Fair, and later updated and mailed to every Rochester resident. A Power Point presentation has been developed for public outreach presentations. Committee members accepted 2 invitations to present project information on 10/27 and on 11/2; invitations to present are directed to the Committee co-chairs. Please visit to our website—RHS Repurposing Project.org—for more details, project updates, and RRC committee members.

2023 Project media coverage:

WCAX TV

[VT communities give new life vacant school buildings](#)

Melissa Cooney | March 9, 2023