

NEWSLETTER

VOL. 1

Self-Storage Could Come to Village Shops

Back in August, engineer and licensed surveyor, Kenneth Hrica appeared before the Inland Wetlands Commission (IWC) to present a plan for the blighted Country Village Shops. But it was a short meeting as the commission informed Hrica part of the parcel in question was actually a flood zone and may be under FEMA's control. On September 20, 2023, Hrica was back with more information and a plan for self-storage.

Representing Alta Property and Thomas Briggs, Hrica said he found a FEMA letter with an amended map, saying that FEMA took portions of the parcel out of the flood zone. Specifically, Hrica showed FEMA still has most of the property in the flood zone, but that an amendment in 2007 took some structures out of Flood Zone A. FEMA also took one structure out of Flood Zone B. The remaining structures are in Flood Zone C. And the entire property is directly adjacent to Stafford Self-Storage.

Here's how FEMA defines those zones:

- Zone A - Areas with a 1% annual chance of flooding and a 26% chance of flooding over the life of a 30-year mortgage. Because detailed analyses are not performed for such areas; no depths or base flood elevations are shown within these zones.

- Zone B - Area of moderate flood hazard, usually the area between the limits of the 100-year and 500-year floods. B Zones are also used to designate base floodplains of lesser hazards, such as areas protected by levees from 100-year flood, or shallow flooding areas with average depths of less than one foot or drainage areas less than 1 square mile.
- Zone C - Area of minimal flood hazard, usually depicted on FIRMs as above the 500-year flood level. Zone C may have ponding and local drainage problems that don't warrant a detailed study or designation as base floodplain.

Hrica went on to say FEMA determined the elevation of the flood zone is 509.0. He explained that if there is a proposal to build in Flood Zone A, you can build a residential building in a 100-year flood zone, but any commercial buildings must be one foot above the flood zone. He said they always planned to build at an elevation of 510, putting the building at one foot above the flood zone. He did note that a small corner of the building is in Flood Zone A, so he will need to go before the PZC to show the plans meet requirements.

A catch basins at the back of the plaza designed to help protect a pond, and the wetlands are failing. Hrica noted a washout behind one of the catch basins which created a gully. The board voted to advance the project as long as this issue is addressed.

Borough School Project Gets the Go-Ahead

It's official; the former Borough School is getting a new lease on life.

Back in August, Bluebird Construction presented its plan to turn the vacant school into a 20-unit apartment building under the 8-30g CGS statute for affordable housing. At the September 7, 2023, Planning and Zoning Commission (PZC) public hearing, Engineer Frank Vacca presented some small changes to the plan, most of which were responses to comments at the last meeting. These included more amenities for the future residents, like picnic tables and a fire pit, a bike rack, and a high-flow dry well to handle potential water run-off.

Six of the 20 units will be designated as affordable. Normally, Stafford's zoning regulations would only allow for 12 units in this location, but 8-30g allows developers to override local regulations to provide affordable housing.

While there is a rather complicated formula that designates what one can charge for affordable rental units based on the median income of the area, the size of the family, and the size of the unit, what it boils down to for the property in question is this:

- 1 bedroom - \$1,159
- 2 bedrooms - \$1,296
- 3 bedrooms - \$1,699

Families must demonstrate that they fall within the designated income limits to qualify for these units. At the upper limit, HUD regulations say they can make 80% of the median income in the area.

Affordable housing is often defined as housing that costs 30% of a household's income. [The Partnership for Strong Communities reports](#), "Over 200,000 households are spending more than half their income on housing costs. In Connecticut, the amount a person must make per hour to afford a typical two-bedroom apartment is \$25.40 and the average wage for a renter is \$17.53 ([NLIHC, 2019](#))."

And the existing lack of affordable housing is only getting worse. According to [CTMirror.org](#), Connecticut could lose 300 affordable housing units this year, with thousands more to follow in the next five years: "Rules that require certain housing units to be rented at affordable rates will expire on thousands of units, while other units are likely to fall into disrepair and become unsafe."

During public comments, Laura Lybarger said, "I'm really pleased to see not just the whole project, but the affordability part." She said she was happy to know families with limited means would have a nice place to live.

PZC Dave Palmberg said, "I think it'll be a nice improvement to the neighborhood." He also pointed out that it's an ideal location for the use. Palmberg, Ron Houle, Cynthia Rummel, Richard Shuck, and alternate Leonard Clark voted unanimously to approve the project.



Hydeville Mill Moves a Step Closer to Demolition

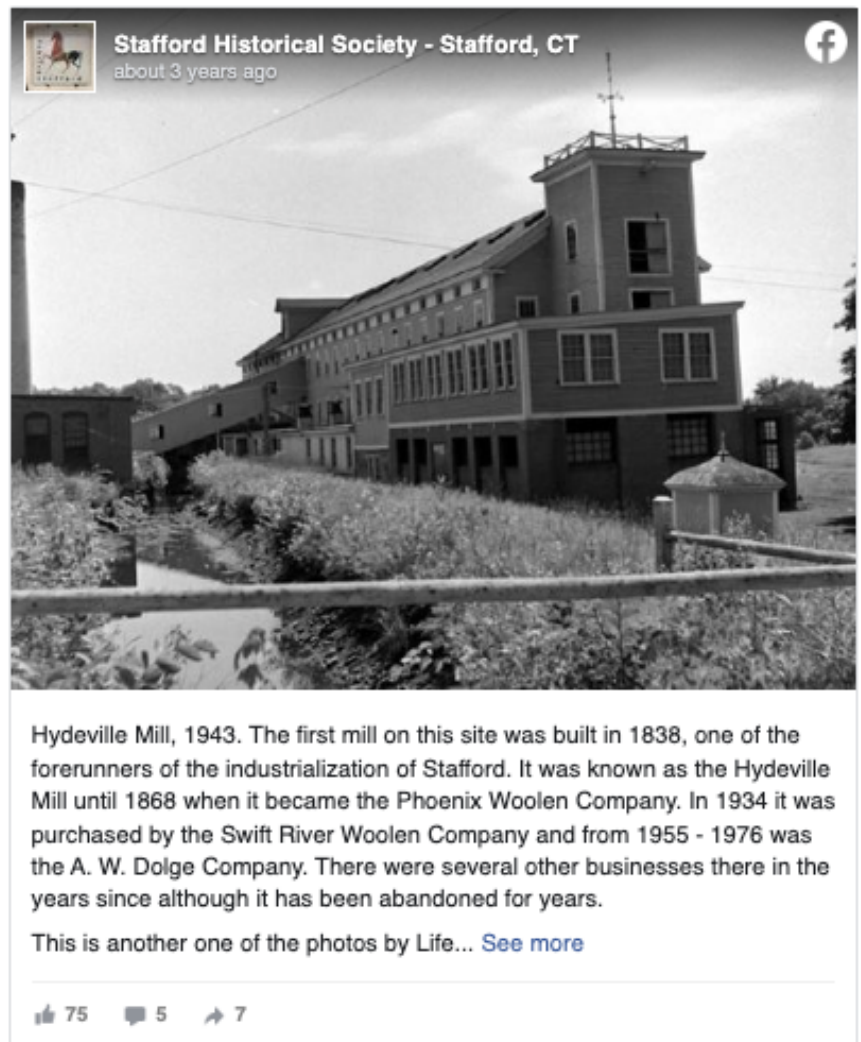
The Hydeville Mill has seen better days. Once the site of woolen mills, today it's on Stafford's list of brownfield sites. According to the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), a brownfield site is "real property, the expansion, redevelopment, or reuse of which may be complicated by the presence of a hazardous substance, pollutant, or contamination." And while Amber Wakley-Whaley, Director of Grants and Community Development, has been pursuing grant funds to help redevelop other brownfield sites in town (like the Witt School), she said at the September 6, 2023, Board of Selectmen's meeting that Hydeville Mill is too far gone to save.

Asbestos, PCBs, and other common contaminants have been found at the mill. But it's also so structurally unsound that many of the normal assessments for brownfields simply could not be completed. And with that knowledge in hand, the EPA has recommended it for emergency response demolition and further testing.

"It's a big win!" Wakley-Whaley said. The purpose of demolishing the building and getting clean-up started is to get the property back on the tax rolls.

The Selectmen had some logistical questions. For instance, there are vehicles parked on the property, and owners have not, in the past, responded to requests to remove them. Obviously, they need to go in advance of demolition and it's not clear who has the ability to enforce it. Attorney Wendell Avery has been the acting conservator, of sorts, since the mill's actual owner died, and it ended up in the town's hands. There is, however, time to figure these logistical questions out. The Federal government tends to move slowly, so work isn't likely to get underway until Spring.

In the meantime, Wakley-Whaley said she's working with the Technical Assistance for Brownfields (TAB) program at UCONN to figure out what comes after the demo. "Supported by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency Technical Assistance for Brownfields Program, the UConn TAB supports New England communities to advance investigation, cleanup and redevelopment of abandoned, potentially contaminated sites, protect public health and promote environmental justice," according to the program's site.



ARPA Commission Votes Down \$500k Transfer

In September, the ARPA Commission met and discussed the possibility of transferring \$500,000 of its remaining unassigned balance of ARPA money (\$865,764) to Stafford's General Fund to shore up the town's rainy day fund. The commission put the decision off, saying it needed more time to decide whether this was viable. The entire issue was raised after Lynn Nenni, Interim Finance Director, appeared before the Board of Selectmen to talk about a deficit in the utility budget that has been a problem since 2018. Most recently, the utility budget ran about \$2,261,000 over, and the town has borrowed from the General Fund to make up the balance.

Current town policy says the General Fund should hold about 10-14% of the budget (which would be \$4.4 million on the low-end for 2023) in unassigned balance. But Nenni's preliminary estimates for 2023 put that balance at just \$2.8 million. With an estimated \$1.6 million difference between the goal balance and the projected balance, the \$500,000 from the ARPA funds would only get the General Fund about one-third of the way to where it needs to be.

The ARPA Commission reconvened for a Special Meeting on September 21, 2023, to revisit the issue. While Nenni, First Selectman Sal Titus, and Steve Geryk — who is on the Board of Finance as well as the ARPA Commission — stressed the importance of padding the General Fund. Nenni posited a potential "Do Nothing" scenario, which could cost the town even more money in interest down the line. If the town's ability to get favorable bond terms is impacted by the lack of funds in reserve, Nenni speculated that it could cost the town upwards of \$60,000 a year.

Meanwhile, other members of the committee weren't convinced this was a legitimate use of the ARPA funds, which come with a long list of strings attached. Amber Wakley-Whaley, Director of Grants and Community Development, said she was still waiting to hear back from Congressman Joe Courtney's office with guidance on the legality of this use.

Commission member Cathy Cannon pointed out that well-known funding shortfalls remain regarding road improvements. ARPA funds can be used for these projects, and the DPW has proposed several. At the previous ARPA meeting, Devin Cowperthwaite reiterated that the town often loses out on grant opportunities because the legwork to get the projects "shovel ready" hasn't been done. ARPA funds could be used to get the projects more grant-ready.

Additionally, commission member Dave Bchiochi pointed out that they have not approved many projects in the recreation category and that he was reluctant to yield such a large portion of the unobligated balance.

Ultimately, the commission voted not to approve moving the funds, with only Titus and Geryk voting in favor. The commission did, however, say it was willing to reconsider the topic at a future meeting when additional information might be available.



Stafford's Candidate Roundup

Election season is upon us. No, we're not talking about the Presidential election circus. We've got a bit more time before that heats up. This Fall, we're focused on our local elections — when the voters of Stafford go to the polls to decide who will be responsible for making the decisions that impact the town every day. From schools to budgets, it's all on the ballot this November.

The Republicans and Democrats have both announced their full slate of candidates. For First Selectman, the Republicans have chosen Kurt Vail — a familiar name in these parts because Vail already represents the 52nd district (Stafford, Woodstock, Union, and Somers) at the State House. [Vail](#) was also elected to the Stafford Board of Selectmen in 2021. ([Learn more about Vail's voting record here.](#))

On the Democratic side of the proverbial aisle, political newcomer William (Bill) Morrison is running for First Selectman. Morrison is the Assistant Chief of the West Stafford Fire Department, a volunteer position. He is also a U.S. Army veteran and retired from the State Department of Transportation in 2023, where he ended his career as a manager before deciding to run for the office of Stafford's First Selectman.

Naturally, Vail's position at the State level has voters wondering how he can also run for another elected position, but there are no laws to address this specific situation: ["A person can run for two different offices at the same state election, but the so-called dual job ban prohibits an individual from serving in the General Assembly and any position in the executive or judicial departments of state government during the term for which he was elected \(regardless of whether he resigns from his legislative office\) \(Ct. Const. Art. III, § 11 and CGS § 2-5\)."](#) Because First Selectman is a town position, Vail is free to run and hold both offices. But, if you've been wondering what the "Full-Time Leadership" billboard on Route 190 is referring to, now you know.

The Stafford First Selectman position comes with a salary of roughly [\\$80,000 per year](#). State Representatives are given a base salary, which was raised from \$28,000 to \$44,000 in 2022. When lawmakers voted to increase this salary, [NBC Connecticut reported](#), "Rep. Doug Dubitsky, R-Chaplin, argued during the debate that the current low pay and long hours associated with working at the Capitol has made it impossible for most people to become a lawmaker."

For full candidate lists, see below:

Republican Slate of Candidates — Stafford, CT

- First Selectman: Kurt Vail
- Selectman: JJ Martorelli
- Town Clerk: Melissa Hallenbeck Augusto
- Town Treasurer: Danele Pollard Rhoads
- Board of Finance (2 yr term): Richard Shuck
- Board of Finance (4 yr term): Tony Pellegrino
- Board of Education: Eileen Bartlett Clark
- Board of Education: Shana Boland
- Board of Education: Mike Delano
- Board of Assessment Appeals: Dave Galotto
- Planning & Zoning Commission: Cindy Rummel
- Constable: Matt Bushior
- Constable: James Ravetto Jr
- Constable: Mark J. Richens
- Constable: Larry Vaughn

Democratic Slate of Candidates — Stafford, CT

- First Selectman: William Morrison
- Selectman: Richard F Hartenstein Jr.
- Town Clerk: Karen G. Troiano
- Town Treasurer: Neil Hoss
- Tax Collector: Stephanie Irving
- Board of Finance (2 yr term): Anthony Armelin
- Board of Finance (4 yr term): Shelley H. West
- Board of Finance (4 yr term): Harold Blake Hatch
- Board of Education: Jennifer R Biedrzycki
- Board of Education: James Greene
- Board of Assessment Appeals: Gene Julian
- Board of Assessment Appeals: Erin Dunn Milnes
- Planning & Zoning Commission: Gene Julian
- Zoning Board of Appeals: Arlene Avery
- Constable: Patrick Soucy
- Constable: Dale Maynard
- Constable: Harold Blake Hatch
- Constable: Gary A. Quinn

Free Lunch Forms Are About More Than Meals

During the COVID-19 pandemic, many people realized for the first time just how important school lunch is for many children in need. That increased awareness has carried over since the height of the pandemic. In early August, a \$16 million investment into the Connecticut school meals program gave thousands of students free breakfast and lunch through the upcoming school year. Funded with American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA) dollars, this money does two things, according to an announcement:

- All students in non-Community Eligibility Provision (CEP) schools participating in the federal School Breakfast Program (SBP) will be able to receive breakfast meals at no cost, including day students within residential childcare institutions. Approximately 114 districts participating in the SBP are eligible to receive this funding serving an estimated 177,243 eligible students.
- Students who are eligible for reduced-price meals in non-CEP schools participating in the federal National School Lunch Program (NSLP) will be able to receive lunch at no cost, including day students within residential childcare institutions. Approximately 128 districts participating in the NSLP are eligible to receive this funding, serving an estimated 13,197 eligible students.

However, many Stafford students who would be eligible for these programs aren't taking advantage of it, according to the Monday, September 11, 2023, Board of Education (BOE) meeting. Part of this stems from confusion, as elementary school students automatically get free meals. West Stafford and Stafford Elementary, are CEP schools, where all students receive free breakfast and lunch due to their level of need. However, students at the middle and high schools must fill out a form to qualify.

Understandably, families with students of varying ages may not realize the policies differ across schools.

More reasons to fill out the free/reduced lunch forms

It's also worth pointing out that filling out the free/reduced lunch form has benefits for students and schools that go beyond the lunch room. The information collected in these forms helps determine state and federal funding for schools including for technology and other resources for classrooms, teachers, and children. High school students looking to take the SATs or ACTs can also get fee waivers based on these forms.

Each school has its own form, and parents can check their kids' backpacks to find the forms. Kids with negative balances on their lunch accounts would have received a notice along with a copy of the form. Alternatively, you can fill the form out online. You can navigate to the form from this page (just click on the apple near the bottom of the page) or go here.

Stafford Scores \$209k+ in STEAP Funding

In a press release, [Governor Ned Lamont's office](#) announced it approved "the release of \$24.5 million in state grants for 60 small towns in Connecticut that will be used to complete a wide variety of infrastructure improvements, such as road safety reconstruction projects, sewer and drainage upgrades, sidewalk and pedestrian safety enhancements, recreational facility upgrades, and other kinds of capital improvement projects."

The grants are part of the [Small Town Economic Assistance Program](#) (STEAP), a state program managed by the Office of Policy and Management (OPM). The program is designed to "deliver grants to small towns for economic development, community conservation, and quality-of-life capital projects."

Stafford qualified for \$209,274 in state funding to replace paving at the community center parking lot and lower parking area at the Kealy Complex. The grant will be matched by \$10,000 in town funds and \$21,228 in additional funding, according to the press release.

Originally the Board of Selectmen (BOS) voted to pursue this grant to purchase the former Cumberland Farms building near Town Hall, and the paving at the community center if time allowed. However, at a later meeting, Amber Wakley-Whaley, Director of Grants and Community Development, returned to inform the BOS that an appraisal of the Cumberland Farms building would be needed, and timing would not allow.

"The recommendation at that point was to combine paving and drainage at the Community Center and pavement at Kealy field parking lot," says Selectman Rick Hartenstein.

State Senator Jeff Gordon said via press release, "Investing in northeast Connecticut is critical to the quality of life for people who live and work here, and attracting new residents and businesses to join our communities. While we are the 'Quiet Corner,' we can loudly advocate for what is needed in our towns. Returning this money to the 35th District helps towns to pay for these needed projects without having to raise additional property taxes."

"Our small towns are an integral part of what makes Connecticut such a special place to live and work," Governor Lamont said in the press release. "By working with them on these grants, the state can help get these vital projects completed so these towns can continue to grow, thrive, and attract businesses while improving the quality of life for our residents."

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Candidate Q&A: Rick Hartenstein

In September, we sent Q&As to the Democratic and Republican Town Committees. Our goal was to give the candidates for the Board of Selectmen a chance to respond with their thoughts and speak directly to all of Stafford. The Republican candidates chose not to answer.

So, today we bring you the the first installment of this series. It comes from Rick Hartenstein, who has served on the Board of Selectmen for the past five years. Read on to learn more about Hartenstein and his priorities as a selectman.

Q: What's Stafford's biggest challenge over the next two years, and how do you plan to address it?

A: The biggest challenges for Stafford in the next two years are infrastructure updates and securing funds for our town's needs. My plan to address this involves open communication with the Board of Education (BOE), Board of Finance (BOF), Board of Selectmen (BOS), and taxpayers. We need to determine how to best communicate with our residents. A survey could be helpful in understanding how to best communicate information to residents. Additionally, working with our state legislature to apply for available funds is crucial.

Q: Please tell us what you believe the role of First Selectman / Selectman is in the community.

A: The role of the First Selectman/Selectmen is to oversee the town and its operations. They should collaborate with department heads for fiscal responsibility, represent Stafford at various functions, and work with our legislature to secure funding for our town. It's crucial to always listen to our taxpayers and prioritize the Town of Stafford.

Q: How has your professional experience prepared you for the job of First Selectman / Selectman?

A: My three-decade-long service to the Town of Stafford, particularly at the Water Pollution Control Facility, has greatly prepared me. I've chaired the Hyde Park Commission and other important committees, improving our parks, emergency services, and infrastructure. Being a selectman for the last five years has also provided me with a hands-on understanding of the challenges and opportunities our town faces.

Q: Between brownfield remediation, new pocket parks, and repurposing old schools, can you tell us about your vision for the future of Stafford?

A: Stafford's older buildings, like the Witt school, hold potential. I envision the Witt school becoming a hotel after its necessary remediation. Other buildings, like Staffordville School, could serve as medical offices or town offices. Our town's redevelopment, including brownfield remediation and new pocket parks, is vital for Stafford's growth and progress. We also owe it to our tax-paying residents to provide community-focused spaces that will enhance our enjoyment and quality of life in Stafford.

Q: What initiatives would you like to see boards and commissions tackle over the next couple of years?

A: Quarterly meetings between our BOS, BOF, and BOE are crucial for understanding budget requests and updating taxpayers. Our down-ballot candidates are also on board with this idea, as are our current sitting board and commission members. I'd also propose video recording all town-related meetings to enhance accessibility. Implementing these measures will keep our community engaged and informed.

[Responses have been very lightly edited for clarity, typos, etc., but the answers are primarily as the candidates wrote them.]

Candidate Q&A: Bill Morrison

Q: What's Stafford's biggest challenge over the next two years, and how do you plan to address it?

A: The most challenging issue facing the town presently — and likely to continue for a while — is the fiscal picture. The annual budget falls short of addressing the essential needs of the community. An example of this is the Public Works Department. Its budget is only a bare minimum to sustain (minimally) the infrastructure within the town and has no money for sustainable improvements — such as road improvements, paving, waterway improvements, and equipment maintenance, and, of course, the unknown storm damage.

The education budget has been cut to a point where I believe educators are wondering how they can perform the duties expected of them and, in some cases, are concerned if they will continue to be employed by the school system at all. There were several cuts to the school board budget just to meet the bottom line. I do not believe there was a clear picture from the taxpayer to indicate that the School Board Budget was too high or too low. This needs to be fixed.

Three referendums were held to pass a budget approved at a mill increase of .98 mills from a starting point of over 3 mills. A mill represents about \$870,000.00, so all boards and commissions will likely feel the adjustment/cut.

My plan to address the issue is twofold. Start by opening up communication with all of the stakeholders, boards, commissions, etc., and begin this communication immediately.

will attempt a cohesive approach to dealing with the budget downfalls with the BOE, BOF, and the Board of Selectmen. There is an obvious sense of frustration with the Boards when dealing with the never-ending budget issues.

I will send out via Facebook and Everbridge (if possible) information about selectmen's meetings, the budget status, and important information about the budget in an effort to pass a budget by a town meeting that is well thought out and supported by the taxpayers on the first attempt, thus saving approximately \$4,000.00 per referendum. I believe the earlier we start working on the budget, the more informed the taxpayers will be. I will be entering the office during the second quarter of an already underfunded town budget, so information sharing and citizen input are imperative.

I will work with the Economic Development Commission (EDC) and request that they actively solicit business to our town that will fit the area's makeup to offset some of the tax base.

I will reach out to the capitol, the governor, state representatives, and our senator and challenge them to bring some money back into our town...state grants, and perhaps a state bond to help kick-start our economy.

I will open up the lines of communication from the town hall to the taxpayers That is, provide the people in attendance of a BOS Meeting an opportunity to participate in the meeting during the meeting — not only at the beginning or the end — and allowing public comment throughout the entire meeting. I will encourage the other boards and commissions to do the same in an effort to get all points of view from as many as possible so an informed decision can be made by the Selectman.

Candidate Q&A: Bill Morrison Continued

Q: Please tell us what you believe the role of First Selectman/Selectman is in the community.

A: These BOS positions should be the voice of reason. The entire board has a responsibility to represent the town in all matters where taxpayers' issues present themselves. The BOS should be a board that coordinates all activities town-wide, representing all citizens.

The most important responsibility is to protect the citizens by way of public safety. This role would be to coordinate emergencies of all types, natural disasters, large power outages, public gatherings, and to maintain emergencies that are well-trained, equipped, and in a state of good readiness. Working with police, fire, emergency management, and ambulance — pre-plans need to be in place, updated, and prepared to be launched when necessary. The board, through its representatives, should be the conduit to the state coordinating the needs of the town at any given level at any given time during an emergency. All of this should be pre-planned and reviewed as needed prior to any emergency.

The role must include budget oversight — all budgets all the time. The Board of Selectman must work with all of the boards continuously throughout the fiscal year to keep the costs of government down. That is our job!

Q: How has your professional experience prepared you for the job of First Selectman / Selectman?

A: I was employed by the State of Connecticut for 41 years (recently retired) in the office of maintenance. I retired as a Transportation Maintenance Manager with a parenthetical (Bridge). During my tenure with the state, I was responsible for the maintenance and repair of Bridge & Structures

within two districts, numbering about 2000. I worked with budgets in excess of \$20,000,000 utilizing both state and federal contracts. I was responsible for developing and implementing plans for my department.

I held and continue to hold titles and positions in several emergency services organizations, including Civil Defense, EMS, Fire, etc. I am presently the Assistant Chief of the West Stafford Fire Department and have held this title for the last 28 years. I am currently the President of the Tolland/Windham County Mutual Aid Ambulance Association. I have been involved in many town functions where calls for service included road/bridge repair, EMS, and fire-related calls for service.

I was also responsible for scheduling, chairing, and reporting on meetings of various types as requested by the department. I maintained offices in several parts of the state determined by my work location and job assignment.

Q: Between brownfield remediation, new pocket parks, and repurposing old schools, Stafford's redevelopment is really humming along. Can you tell us a bit about your vision for the future of Stafford and how you think some of these projects could shape that future?

A: The remediation of the old buildings must be the first priority in that there are funding possibilities to deal with these structures (three schools, the Hydeville Mill, etc.) I would work with our grant writer (Amber Wakely) to establish a full plan for dealing with these structures that fall under the criteria as part of an overall plan for the town and to set a vision and share that vision for the future.

I would work with the EDC, Board of Selectmen, and a citizen action group to establish a priority list for the town and a plan that would improve the quality of life for the townspeople now and for the future.

Candidate Q&A: Bill Morrison Continued

I would engage the community through open forums to have a long-range plan for the future of our buildings and parks. This would involve the Zoning Boards as well. In addition, I would encourage the partnership of the townspeople and boards for a well-planned guide for a productive outcome, a plan that would meet the needs now and for the future.

Q: Much of the work of governing and shaping the future of a town is done at the board level. What initiatives would you like to see boards and commissions tackle over the next couple of years?

A: First and foremost, I would like to see a renewed respect between all of the boards and commissions and the townspeople — and coordinate these necessary organizations and their ideas in a respectful manner by way of planning. I would like to see long-range plans encompassing 5-10-15- and 20-year sustainable plans to include the BOE, BOS, and BOF. I would like to see an annually funded "capital improvements program" that would include equipment replacement, building upgrade, and replacement.

I would also like to see all boards continue, during the budget year, to work on savings on their budget allotments using the focus on wants and needs. Do you need the items programs, or do you want the items? We all want something, but do we need it? Those questions should be answered in part by the BOS.

I would like to do an overview of the agencies we have presently and see if we can combine any of them for cost savings without losing our focus on service. An example of this could be the consolidation of the emergency services.

I would meet with area town CEOs quarterly (Ellington, Somers, Willington, Union) in an effort to see if we can combine services between towns more than we do now.

Information sharing must be town-wide as the stakeholders are the townspeople.

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