

THE SANDISFIELD TIMES

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EXTRA!

RECOVERY AFTER DISASTER

“We’re Going to Get Through This Okay”

By Thomas Christopher

Select Board Chair John Skrip has a message about the recent town garage fire for the residents of Sandisfield:

“We [the town government] are doing everything we can. We’re insured, the state picked up the snow plowing. [Surrounding] towns have been very helpful. Residents have called, offering their trucks to help. We’re going to get through this. We’re going to get through this okay.”

In fact, that’s the way it looks.

According to Skrip, the town was fully insured at the time of the fire. Better yet, he added, Sandisfield was insured for the replacement costs of most of the equipment and facilities lost. One vehicle was so old that the insurance company, Massachusetts Interlocal Insurance Association, will pay only assessed value, but the rest of the loss is covered at replacement value.

Nor does Skrip foresee any impact on the town’s other financial business. Although Sandisfield has not, as yet, availed itself of the offer, the insurance carrier has offered money to cover day-to-day expenses incurred by the loss of the garage and road equipment.

What’s more, the state will be plowing the paved roads in town with a charge only for the sand and salt used. “That’s forty-three miles of roads, that’s a piece of change,” Skrip points out. *Cont’d p.2*



Fire Destroys Town Garage

By Brigitte Ruthman

It happened fast.

So fast that even after local and five mutual aid fire departments were summoned and arrived within minutes of the first alarm, the town’s highway department and all three of its heavy trucks were burned beyond repair.

Within an hour of the 9:40 a.m., call on December 10, the entire fleet of highway, plow, and storm-damage equipment lay in ruins. The loss is estimated at more than \$1 million. *Cont’d p.3*

"We're Going to Get Through This Okay"

Cont'd from p.1

The town has contracted with private companies to plow the dirt roads. Anyone whose access has been missed in this process, says town Administrator Fred Ventresco, should call his office at 413-258-4711, ext. 1.

The question of rebuilding the garage and where is currently under discussion. A lot of decisions will need to be made before that process gets seriously underway.

The answers would be greatly simplified if the town decides to rebuild on the same footprint as the old garage and allows the insurance carrier to handle the process directly.

However, that may not be the best decision, given that the old structure was barely large enough to house the town trucks and, because it was made of concrete block, it was very expensive to heat. Also, changing the footprint of the building would require. 🗞

Help Offered From Near and Far

By Times Reporters

In something of an "embarrassment of riches," Highway Superintendent Bobby O'Brien told a Times reporter at the December 18 Select Board meeting that the Town had received "about thirty" offers of help from other towns across the state.

He reported to the Board that several towns have offered to loan Sandisfield, indefinitely or as gifts, good vehicles for \$1 or for free. The towns include Sudbury, Needham, and Blandford. The town of Quincy in particular will bring three trucks as a gift to the town. Ironically, all this is probably more than the Town needs or can handle. Selectman John Skrip expressed amazement and gratitude at the extent and level of help that has been offered from other towns and town residents.

State Representative Smitty Pignatelli is helping O'Brien find temporary buildings for storage of small equipment. In the meantime, a shipping container for storage has been installed at the site of the burned-out garage. Offers of help to store or the use of service facilities have come from New Marlborough and Tonlino Construction of Tolland.

Due to lack of utilities at the damaged site, fuel tanks are inoperable. Fuel is being bought from Katie's Store in East Otis, where town accounts have been arranged for the Department of Public Works and the Fire and Police Departments.

Sandisfield has received an advance insurance check for \$50,000, which enables the Town to obtain essential equipment like chain saws and other materials lost in the fire. 🗞



All photos (except where noted) by Simon Winchester

Fire Destroys Town Garage

Cont'd from p.1

The town's fourth truck, a Ford F-350 dump truck parked outside, was scorched, its wipers and mirrors melted, but survived.

The cause of the fire remains under investigation and may remain as "undetermined" by state fire detectives, Jennifer Mieth of the Massachusetts State Fire Marshals' office said. It will likely be left to insurance investigators to further refine a cause. Eerily similar to another garage fire in neighboring Tolland a year earlier, which also occurred on the cusp of winter and its first storm, this fire too has been ruled accidental.

"There are a number of possible unintentional causes within the area of origin," Mieth said. "We have a good idea where the fire started."

That area, firefighters say, was in the roof area which was ablaze above as-yet-undamaged trucks when the first of two dozen firefighters arrived. On the crisp morning the fire popped and crackled, exploding tires and flammables within the building.

The building's heating system is a prime suspect. It occupied a space-saving area closer to the roof than the floor, near insulation stuffed between the rafters of the 1940-era cinder block building.

Fire Marshal Eric Munson Jr. said he wasn't required to inspect it and had only been inside once, years ago.

Because of its age, the garage was grandfathered into building codes which today would have required extensive safety and preventative measures, bathrooms, alarm and heat detection systems – all of which will be included in a replacement structure.

"That building should have been replaced years ago," said Munson.

Like the fire in Tolland a year earlier, Sandisfield's fire was so hot that pinpointing a cause in a severely damaged area will be difficult. In Tolland, the garage had recently undergone renovation, but retained gas heaters in the ceiling that today remain suspect.

Both towns have the same insurance company, MIIA, which Munson said covered all costs and "didn't cost taxpayers a penny." As in Sandisfield, a check was cut not long after the fire stopped smoldering to afford the replacement of smaller everyday items used by the highway crew like chain saws and shovels. Completely replacing Tolland's building took most of a year.

THE COURSE OF THE FIRE

Wooden timbers in the ceiling framework of the cinder block building were touched off as the last employee, David McCuin, left the building that morning. Highway Superintendent Bobby O'Brien had left just before him after tucking the town's trucks into their narrow bays following cleanup duties from a 6-inch snowfall the day before.

With no alarm or sprinkler system, it took two passersby along the lightly travelled Route 57 and a neighbor to notice flames licking from the eaves 200 yards down Silverbrook Road, and wisps of black smoke, for the first 911 call to be made.

The call set in motion a response by the town's volunteer fire department, and it's chief, Ralph Morrison, who lives nearly within sight of the growing plume of smoke that morning.

Fighting a fire in a small town begins with knowledge. Morrison knew within seconds of the call that his crew could draw water from the Clam River and that tankers could deliver more. They never ran out of water – a significant factor in



Highway Superintendent Bobby O'Brien at the fire scene.

rural areas without hydrants. It took less than an hour to bring the fire under control.

Morrison also knew that the Monterey Fire Department has an aerial ladder truck capable of shooting water from a higher angle than tankers. And that a 1,000-gallon tank containing highly flammable gasoline stood just 25 feet from the burning building, posing a risk to firefighters. Heating oil, by comparison, has a far higher combustion temperature.


The first task for firefighters was to cool down the gas tank.

"It's what the first hose line went to," Morrison said.

He knew the black smoke was typical of the initial phase of a fire as it feeds on combustibles, especially asphalt roof shingles. Even though no interior attack was launched, firefighters were required to wear SCBA-self-contained breathing apparatus that provides clean air as materials inside the garage burned and emitted potentially toxic smoke.

"The three large town trucks inside the garage weren't on fire yet," Morrison said. Still, with the roof unstable, it wasn't safe to send anyone inside to back the trucks out or to fight the fire from within.

The heavily used oil furnace, located off the floor to save space, is the likely culprit, Morrison said.

"When they turned that oil furnace on, it ran constantly through the winter," he added. And it's run that way for many years. 



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Property Tax Bills Incorrect

After property tax bills were mailed to residents in mid-December, Town Hall was flooded with calls from worried citizens whose bills included late-payment penalties that had been incorrectly added to the basic amount due.

Town Accountant Dawn Lemon issued an urgent statement on the Sandisfield website that due to a “computer conversion error” this year’s tax bills were “incorrect.” Apologizing on behalf of the town, Ms. Lemon said “there is no interest being charged until January 22, 2018 – therefore please submit payment for the lesser amount.”

At the Select Board meeting December 18, Chair John Skrip made clear that anyone receiving such a bill should pay only the assessed taxes and NOT the penalty, which is a calculated late-payment interest of approximately 3 percent.

Apparently the error was caused by the outside company with which the town contracts to prepare and send out tax bills. The issue will be discussed at the next Select Board meeting, Tuesday, December 26, 7 p.m., Town Hall Annex. 

The next issue of The Sandisfield Times will be the combined January/February issue, due out about January 20




The destroyed Town garage blanketed with Sandisfield snow.

Photo: Setsuko Winchester

The Times Released Same-Day EXTRA

On the same Sunday of the early morning fire that destroyed Sandisfield’s garage and heavy trucks, The Sandisfield Times released an EXTRA alerting its online readers of the disaster. The email went to all online subscribers and others the paper has email addresses for.

Written from on-the-scene reports by Simon Winchester and Brigitte Ruthman, the early EXTRA gave first details of the loss to the town, provided photographs at the scene, and quoted Fire Chief Ralph Morrison and Highway Superintendent Bobby O’Brien. A follow-up email quoted Select Board Chair John Skrip with reassurance that the loss could be covered by insurance and that town roads would be plowed during a coming snowstorm, despite the loss of snowplows.

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– Bill Price, West New Boston