



America's Small Town Capital

Election Follow-Up

By William Fraser, City Manager

March 21, 2023

Our clocks have changed, we've passed the vernal equinox, the temperatures are slowly rising, and Town Meeting Day has come and gone. These are all signs that spring is making its usual slow crawl into Vermont.

Annual Meeting Wrap-up

Congratulations to Mayor Jack McCullough, council member Sal Alfano, council member Tim Heney, council member Pelin Kohn, and council member Lauren Hierl on their elections or re-elections to their posts.

Voter turnout: 2,203 people voted in Tuesday's election. This is almost exactly the average Town Meeting turnout since 1985. More interesting, though, is Montpelier's voter turnout compared to other Vermont communities. I compared this year's voter turnout with the census population for all Vermont cities (except Essex Junction, which doesn't vote until April 11) and a handful of towns near our size. Montpelier had the best voter turnout percentage.

Budget vote: The city budget received 74.1% approval and the school budget received 61.6% approval. Last year's approvals were 81.6% and 73.7%, respectively — this year was down 7.5% on the city side and 12.1% on the school side. It's the first year since 2014 that the city budget approval was below 80%, and the lowest approval since 69.9% in 2012. For the schools, it's the first time since 2016 that approval was below 70% and the lowest since 2014, when the school budget was defeated.

Mayoral Election: The annual reports only list election results back to 1986. In those 37 years there have been 20 mayoral elections, including this year's one-year term election. Eleven of those 20 elections have been contested. Of those 11, four have had three or more candidates (including this year). This year's election was the only one where the winner in a three- or four-way election received more than 50% of the total vote (53.5%).

A New "Year"

There are three distinct 12-month periods (years) in the city government world. The first is the obvious calendar year, which tracks with the rest of society. The second is the fiscal year, which runs from July 1 to June 30 and is the basis for our budget, accounting, and financial management.

The third, less formal, year is from Town Meeting to Town Meeting. This is the cycle of elections, city council changes, budget approvals, and voter-provided feedback about how the government is doing. Each March, the new city council is sworn in. They revisit their rules of procedure, ethics policy, group norms, committee assignments, and council officers.

One key effort each year is updating and adopting the strategic plan, which highlights the council's short- and long-term priorities. The new council will review the current strategic plan in March and determine whether they wish to reconsider it in the near future or conduct the review in the fall as is typical.

Water Pipes and Pressure

Much has been said and written about the city's water system, water pressure, and timing/costs of needed repairs. Recently published reports mentioned costs of \$166 million. This number, however, is for replacing ALL of the city's water AND sewer pipes that have reached the end of their anticipated design life year period regardless of priority over a 50-year period. The city council, in 2016, approved a plan to address this long-term need.

With regard to more immediate needs, the city replaced all utility pipes on Northfield Street and Clarendon Avenue in recent years. All pipes on East State Street will be replaced as part of the three-year major project happening there. School Street, a major source of water leaks, was partially replaced this fall and will be completed this summer.

The city commissioned an engineering review of our water system which is now publicly available. This report outlines \$3 million worth of top priority projects to be completed in the next five years. The city anticipates completing another \$4 million worth of priority projects in the subsequent five years. This work will correct all the major sources of failure and fire flow deficiencies within 10 years. Funding for this work is built into the city's infrastructure plan. The report also recommended that the city take no direct action to address water pressure other than improving pipes. They found that the costs and residual problems created by adjusting pressure were significant and would add greater complexity in maintaining the water system. After the report is reviewed by the State Water Supply Division, the consultant will make a presentation to the city council at a meeting, hopefully in May. This report is essential for guiding the highest priority work as well as providing an engineering basis for grant and loan applications.

Public Participation

The annual election is the most direct and definitive form of public participation in our local government. People may agree or disagree with the outcome of certain votes, but the outcome sets the parameters for the city government for the next year.

The city values public participation well beyond voting though. This past year we conducted the Polco National Citizen Survey about a wide variety of city services and priorities. Montpelier was fortunate to have a very high response. We have used the results to guide decisions and programs. A benefit of doing the survey is access to the Polco polling software. We have used that on several occasions with regard to the Country Club Road project and will be employing it even more frequently this year. Please create an account to receive polls and notices through the city's website.

The Country Club Road project is relying heavily on public participation. There have been two full rounds of public discussion sessions as well as polling. The project team will be presenting those results along with recommendations at the council meetings on March 22 and April 12. Additionally, the council regularly accepts public comments at its meetings. There is a section of the meetings devoted to general comments and people can usually comment on specific agenda items as well.

Information

For those of you who want to stay abreast of information about city government, there are several ways to do so:

- All meetings of city boards, commissions, committees and the like are open to the public.
- This “City Page” article in The Bridge is published monthly.
- The city’s website www.montpelier-vt.org includes news, updates, notices, and information about projects as well as agendas, minutes and other meeting documents. All documents that go to the city council for meetings are posted publicly.
- The city manager and department heads write a [weekly memo to the city council](#) providing updates and information about city activity. This memo is posted for all to see on the city’s website. The memo includes a tentative schedule for upcoming council agenda items. This also includes the DPW Newsletter, which provides work and project updates.
- All (or most) council meetings and meetings of major boards and committees are broadcast — and often rebroadcast — on local cable TV.
- All (or most) of the above meetings are both streamed and archived for viewing on the city’s website and on YouTube.
- The city has a Facebook page “[City of Montpelier, VT — official](#)” on which updates are posted and also links to some updates from the website. Several departments have their own Facebook pages as well.
- The city regularly posts items of interest, including council agendas, on [Front Porch Forum](#).
- People can sign up to receive regular city surveys and notices through our [Polco application](#).
- The annual report, distributed in February, provides an overview of the city government’s year. It is [available online](#) or in print at city hall.
- ALL emergency notifications are issued using VT-Alert. People can receive phone calls, text messages, e-mail, or all. Register for VT-Alert through www.vtalert.gov or by calling 802-347-0488.

Finally, of course, please feel free to contact me or your elected officials with questions or comments about the city government. I can be reached at wfraser@montpelier-vt.org or 802-223-9502. The addresses and phone numbers of other city officials are available on the web.