

"Our advice is the same as it is for anyone else in Vermont. The key is hand-washing. If you're not feeling well, stay home."
Vermont's Tracy Dolan

Transparency needed

With Sunshine Week on the horizon, now more than ever people need honest information. Sunshine Week, March 15 to 21, is an annual call by the news industry for open government and open information. It has been developed over the past 15 years by media outlets large and small to help people understand the importance of free access to information. Vermont Sen. Patrick Leahy and Secretary of State Jim Condos are big supporters of open government and Sunshine Week.

With the very real spread of COVID-19 across the country and more specifically here in the Deerfield Valley, it is more important than ever that people in government, health care, public safety, and elsewhere be more transparent. People need to trust that what is being said is accurate and honest.

No one wants a panic, and the best way to prevent that is with accurate information. Despite cries of "fake news" by some, most media outlets that are grounded in traditional journalism techniques, whether print, TV or digital, will work hard to ensure facts come first, especially when reporting on something as charged as the coronavirus outbreak. That means social media, while often the place where things first show up, shouldn't be the only place people get their information. Especially about something like coronavirus. People need facts to make informed decisions, and oftentimes posts on social media are more rumor or conjecture than fact.

We're not saying avoid social media. We ourselves use it to track down basic information and leads. But, as good journalists do, we make the phone calls and send the emails to verify what may or may not be true. That's just plain, old gumshoe work. Tracking down details and verifying information.

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We understand public officials, especially those in the medical profession, have to find a way to balance the need to know with personal privacy under the law, privacy protected by HIPPA rules and other laws.

But leaders have a responsibility to lead. We need officials to speak as honestly and openly as they can about where situations might be occurring. That doesn't always happen.

Just take this week's news about coronavirus being confirmed in Vermont. It took state officials two days to say publicly that the "presumed positive" case was found in Readsboro. In the beginning, officials were saying it was found in Bennington County. That's too broad a geographic area to do anyone any good. Especially when social media and the local rumor mill had already spread the word of coronavirus being in Readsboro.

We understand, no one wants the first person confirmed with the virus in Vermont to be identified directly. There is no reason to brand that person with a scarlet letter. We completely support withholding the name of the individual, and choose to do that in our own reporting.

But to offer up a wide geographic region of some 678 square miles as the generic center of the outbreak also did no one any good. It just created fear in communities that didn't need it. We choose to identify Readsboro as the location of the outbreak so people could have better information to make informed decisions.

People need to be accepting of what officials say, which puts a lot of pressure on officials, especially those in appointed government positions or private employ. But coronavirus is an equal-opportunity infector. It will infect anyone it can, regardless of affiliation or belief. No one should be in fear of losing their job because they might give out information someone higher up doesn't approve of, or doesn't meet party dogma. That's why we need openness, and a willingness to accept the science and medical facts as they are, not in how they fit some ideological or business position. The health and well-being of thousands are at stake.

Which brings us back to Sunshine Week. Its goals are simple, one of which is to give everyone access to critical information so people can make informed decisions. Now is one of those times when all should embrace that idea wholeheartedly. To do otherwise is a risk no healthy democracy should take.



Overtaxed and underfunded for decades

To the Editor,
The Southern Valley Unified Union School District board discussed the "Pupil Weighting Factors Report." We recognize the long-term effects and inequities in the state's education funding formula. Vermont's smaller towns throughout the state that are in rural or poor districts have been overtaxed and the schools underfunded. This has compounded negative effects.

The report recommends the state's formula be adjusted to better reflect cost of educating poor and English language learner students. The funding formula should be updated using the following cost factors: poverty, percent of ELL, enrollment, population density, middle grades, and secondary grades, which are based on regional and national comparisons and confirmed by an empirical modeling of Vermont data. It also recommends using a different model to fund special education services, such as providing a one-size block grant.

Vermont's education funding formula has led to inequities for some of the state's vulnerable children. The current weights "fall far short of appropriately adjusting for the cost" of educating students who are classified as economically disadvantaged and English language learners. The

state has been raising enough tax dollars, but simply has not been distributing those dollars fairly.

The weighting calculations in question are part of the state's education funding system, commonly referred to as Act 60. The legislation went into effect in 1997 after the state Supreme Court ruled in "Brigham v. State" that Vermont's education funding system was "constitutionally deficient" because it denied students equal access to educational opportunities. At the time, most school funding was raised through local property taxes. Wealthier towns could afford more robust programming. Poorer towns could not. Act 60 sought to remedy those deficiencies through a statewide funding formula.

The report also identified dissatisfaction with the current small schools grant. Its parameters are subjective and not consistent with the goals of other policies such as Act 46. The new cost factors identified in the report of school size and population density should be implemented in lieu of the small schools grant.

If educational equity in Vermont had been defined as student opportunity and measured by student outcomes, then it would have cost more to educate students

in smaller rural settings. Currently one campus of the Southern Valley Unified Union School District's test scores are in the bottom 5% in the state. That campus has had to reduce the art program to 0.2, the music program to 0.2, little to no athletic programs, no band, no language, and both campuses at this time share one principal. The opportunities for our students are limited at this time and comparatively across the state not equitable.

The report found the current pupil weights to be outdated. They do not represent current educational circumstances or costs. In particular, the variation between the current poverty weight (0.25) as compared to the poverty weight determined through the analysis from the report (3.14) suggests immediate action by the General Assembly is necessary to address a significant equity concern in the current education funding system. We ask the Legislature to take immediate action to implement the findings of the student weighting research.

Homer Sumner, Chair
Helyn Strom-Henriksen, Vice chair
Paul Blais
Cindy Florence
Jessica Cooney
James Irace
Halifax and Readsboro

Stump Jumpers' annual barbecue was a success

To the Editor,
The Deerfield Valley Stump Jumpers' annual ride-in barbecue was held on Saturday, March 7, at The Last Chair restaurant in Dover.

With nearly 100 attendees, the event was a big success, raising over \$1,000 to support the club's many expenses (including groomer operations, trail maintenance, culvert care, and repairs to the club's nearly 50 bridges).

Thank you, everyone who attended, including all who rode in despite less than favorable trail conditions, and special thanks to the area businesses that generously donated prizes for our raffle: Betsy's Dot's of Dover, Dot's of Wilmington, Dover Forge, Dunkin' Donuts, Fat City Motor Worx, Ratu's Liquor & Market, Maple Leaf Tavern, River Valley Market, Sticky Fingers, TC's Restaurant, Valley View Saloon, Village Roost, W&B Management/Fabian Fuel, and Wilmington House of Pizza.

Going forward, the club is excited to announce we will be raffling a new 2020 Polaris ATV this summer, in support of continued fundraising for our many endeavors. Tickets can be purchased at Fat City Motor Worx, and anywhere you see the ATV on display.

The Stump Jumpers maintain trails throughout the Deerfield Valley, supporting use by our 1,200 TMA members, and snowmobilers visiting from across the state, as well as warmer season visitors for activities such as hiking and mountain biking.

Please follow and like us on Facebook, and always check vtvast.org/trails for current trail conditions and open and closed status.

Thanks again to everyone who helped make the ride-in barbecue such a success, Think snow!

On behalf of the Deerfield Valley Stump Jumpers,
Mike Garber
Dover

Legion dinner canceled

To the Editor,
The Readsboro American Legion Post #29 corned beef dinner that was slated for Saturday, March 14, has been canceled due to reasons beyond our control.

We did this as a precaution for the safety of our patrons and friends as we feel a large gathering doesn't seem appropriate at this time.

Please check out our Facebook page "Walter Case" for future events.

Thanks for your understanding.
Rhonda Smith
Readsboro

Letter submission policies

Letters to the editor are among the most widely read features of The Deerfield Valley News. We encourage our readers to express a range of opinions on the issues that are important to the community.

- Letters must be submitted by Tuesday at 5 pm.
- Letters are limited to 650 words, except "thank you" letters, which are limited to 250 words.
- No more than three letters in any two-month period may be submitted by any writer.
- We have the right to hold, edit, or reject letters.
- Poetry is not accepted.
- Letters must be signed and include a daytime phone number and town of residence.

For info. call (802) 464-3388 or e-mail editor@vermontmedia.com.



Grateful for the support given during benefit

To the Editor,
Words cannot express our gratitude for the support given to the Kenny Meckle Benefit.

God certainly blessed our event. The amazing number of people who came touched our hearts. For those who bought tickets, gave money, donated desserts and prizes,

helped clean up, spread the word, and showed their love to someone in need, we are truly thankful.

On behalf of the East Dover Baptist Church Youth Group,

Gloria Short, Fawn Crafts, and Lisa Sherman
Dover

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