

Robert Richards, Town of Fair Haven Select Board Chairman

3 North Park Place

Fair Haven, Vermont 05743

August 22nd, 2023

Select board Chair Bob Richards and members of the board,

I am Mike Stannard, newly elected auditor for three years and appointed chairperson of our quorum which includes Lillian Billewicz and Glen Roberts.

First off, thank you all for your commitment to the town and taking the time and energy to be in the minority of Americans who understand our civic duty in this age of apathy. There are two types of people; doers and critics. It is always good to be in a room full of doers.

The night I returned home from Town meeting this year, realizing that our town might lose the ability to ever have an elected office of auditor and that we'd been years without a full quorum in our elected auditors. I had asked clarifying questions at town meeting, the answers to which seemed legitimate, and had taken the time to read the Vermont statute that allows this process. In my frustration, to understand what has happened to our great self-governed town which was once full of true revolutionaries, including three of my Green Mountain Boy ancestors and their compatriots; risking their lives for self-government, I pulled out this 1894-1995 town report and read through the pages prepared by the chairman of the auditors that year, Mr. Allen. This man was truly a pillar of the community who gave so much more than just his signature on a ledger, to our town; still to this day we benefit from his family's generosity and foresight. I felt uneasy and truly sick about this ditching of two-and-a-half centuries of self-government and was inspired to act quickly, and began a strong write-in campaign and won the seat. It has been passed down, in my families' oral history that the original planning for the set-up and founding of this town had been done at the kitchen table of my ancestors, Samuel and Jemimah Stannard, on the site that the red and white "Morris farm" farmhouse (across from the "Welcome to Fair Haven" Sign (North on 22A) stands today, and included the

contribution of Green Mountain Boy Matthew Lyon, Ira Allen and other people whose families' names are still familiar in this town and can be found in the Adams history of Fair Haven, Vermont. It was with a duty to those who came before us and future generations to come, that I joined up with these two others to rejuvenate this office.

All three of our elected auditors have this same zeal to see the Town of Fair Haven become as transparent as a Carl Durfee's storefront window in the next three years and can assure you that it will. Our goal is to have a town that operates and makes its every decision knowing that a group of elected citizens will be reviewing what was done by year's end, as is intended in all Vermont Towns. We, as a quorum, do not wish to grind axes, 'til there's no blade, catch anyone specific at mistakes or incongruities to use as fodder for a personal or outside agenda. Our ambition does not stem from spite or the desire to be punitive, but to have a fair and open functioning town that is free of the fear that our very hard-earned tax dollars are used wisely, and unable to be squandered or embezzled, as we have seen in many Vermont towns in recent years. The town of Middletown, being a great example of this openness and functionality, where three elected residents receive documents in envelopes upon request on occasion out of good faith and often do their own digging through the stacks to save clerical work for town employees. The also "Get a phone call each month when the treasurer gets the statement from the bank" according to Auditor Reverend Tracy Weatherhogg. We, this year's elected auditors, look forward to building a relationship with this and future select boards and hope that everyone here understands the recent history of auditors in our town; having found a nearly million-dollar surplus just over a decade ago. We promise to try digging up another million for Joe and Bob to put to use in next year's budget, but no promises. If the select board and town manager could kindly include a tab on the town web page for auditors' warnings, minutes, reports and letters like this, it would really butter us up to at least find enough to pave Scotch Hill in the next decade.

There are four very important recommendations that we wish not to wait to recommend to the select board until our yearly report.

- In the past month we have reached out to another town's auditor to discuss protocol for access to documents. I have also been discussing said protocol with Joe this August. I have also received complaints from citizens who are confused regarding access to town documents as a citizen.

- The auditors are advising the select board to actually draft a policy regarding access to documents from citizens AND auditors. Should all documents requested be only available through the work of auditors physically “going through” files, or should the clerical work be done by town staff? Should a citizen be able to use the town copier to make copies of documents? Should the chair of a small committee of project in town (ie. Rec committee) be able to request access to bank statements to check for discrepancies in their budget?
 - We advise the select board to read the State statute regarding auditors and make sure that your policy perfectly aligns with this, as we will be in contact with the Secretary of State the morning after it is voted on to make sure it is, as our residents deserve a town that follows the law and supports their auditors. We are quite sure that at times documents must actually be presented to us, upon request.
- Second, we have received two very detailed complaints regarding financial issues in the past weeks that believe deserve an honest “hearing out” from the select board and that the discussion should not be led and interpreted by the town manager, but the two citizens who have experienced the confusion and frustration. Although I am not giving out their names and contacts in this meeting, I will be passing them on to chairman Richards a.s.a.p. These two residents deserve to be heard, as their complaints seem very legitimate. I also hope that our elected auditors can become a forum for said concerns in the future and that these issues can be handled through elected officials and not town employees.
- We have also come to consensus that the town of Fair Haven has some branches, such as the Summer Recreation program, the Dog Park and Concerts in the Park that are incredibly important assets to our community that need to begin providing financial statements and bank account records to the auditors in upcoming years. We are confident, knowing the character of the people in charge of these programs that all is in order, but knowing these programs are too important to see lost or depleted from financial problems caused by turnover or management in the next decade, it should become protocol to submit yearly financial reports to the select board and auditors.
- Lastly, we believe that our town has been missing an important part of a well-functioning municipality, in the last decade; project finance planning and

reporting. It seems as though the town often jumps into large, incredibly expensive infrastructure projects and does the planning as we go. The problem with this is not the sentiments that create the desire to make the town a better place or the feasibility of the projects, but the lack of projection for payment. In recent years and months, there have been some hasty shifting of funds from reserve accounts, voted on by the citizens into paying for projects. Some of these projects being started under the catalyst of grant money. We all know, or should, that large sums of grant money can be “recaptured” if the project does not progress or if funds are used inappropriately. Therefore, this “free money” acts a lot like debt, since the project must roll on, no matter what that means for the budget, taxpayers or town employees. Because of this, we are advising the board to ask the town manager for project finance planning reports for current large projects and any future project, before applying for grants. When large sums of money for such things as paving sidewalks is simply transferred into a project that most people in town haven’t even heard of, there should at least be an acknowledgment of superseding the voters’ intent, afterword. More importantly, it should be avoided prior.

The elected auditors truly hope that in the next three years, the select board , town manager and citizens can see our role in a positive light and work together as an asset to a better functioning Fair Haven and that the tradition of transparency continues another 244 years.

Let’s do this,

Michael R. Stannard

Glen Roberts

Lillian Billewicz

