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—Format.....Opinions
—Dateline.....Brattleboro
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Notes from editor (not for publication):

I did a little work around line 58.

HEADLINE ELEMENTS:

#####BEGIN HED#####

1 Brattleboro Selectboard's shameful budget leaves human
2 services out in the cold

#####END HED#####

#####BEGIN SUBHED#####

3 The human services allocation is the only local public
4 money spent on homelessness services and mental health and
5 addiction treatment in a community where these issues are
6 constantly referred to as a public safety issue

#####END SUBHED#####

7 TEXT BODY:

#####BEGIN TEXT#####

8 ON THE EVE of projected sub-zero temperatures and more
9 than a foot of snow, the Brattleboro Selectboard cut the entirety
10 of the town's human services budget to save homeowners less
11 than \$60 in property taxes.

12 In one act, the Selectboard swiped at Brattleboro's
13 democratic traditions, its most vulnerable residents, and the town
14 government's charge to care for all its inhabitants.

15 Procedurally, the Selectboard's decision represents a
16 significant break from Brattleboro's longstanding approach to
17 funding human services.

18 In recent years, Representative Town Meeting (RTM) has
19 set a percentage of the overall town budget for human services —
20 in fact, the human services allocation is the single line item in the
21 budget the public has this level of control over.

22 Once the allocation is set, the RTM Human Services
23 Committee solicits and rigorously reviews funding requests from
24 local organizations and brings a proposal of up to that cap to the
25 following year's RTM for approval. (This year's funding proposal
26 and cover letter from the Human Services Committee, out last
27 week, are available at brattleboro.gov/human-services-review-committee.)

29 Until this year, the Selectboard has honored RTM's
30 decision by reserving the approved amount in the budget while
31 debating other priorities.

32 At times, it has put forth an article at RTM itself
33 suggesting a reduction in the overall amount for the following
34 year's budget. For example, last year the Selectboard
35 recommended reducing the allocation to 1% of the overall
36 budget.

37 Notably, RTM considered, debated, and ultimately
38 rejected that proposal and instead reaffirmed a 2% allocation —
39 consistent with both past years' practices and a town-wide vote
40 on an advisory ballot question earlier in the year, in which 63%
41 of voters favored human services funding of 1% or more.

42 But until last week, the Selectboard had never before
43 reduced the human services allocation before it reached RTM,
44 nor had it made retroactive changes to an amount already vetted
45 by the Human Services Committee.

46 Thursday night's decision bypasses RTM entirely and
47 nullifies the committee's proposed \$482,665 allocation to 33
48 organizations. This action effectively seizes control of the one
49 line item in the budget set by RTM and undermines the public's
50 role in determining these allocations.

51 * * *

52 IN TERMS OF IMPACT, the decision is quite simply
53 shameful.

54 The human services allocation is the only local public
55 money spent on homelessness services and mental health and
56 addiction treatment in a community where these issues are
57 constantly referred to as a public safety issue.

58 Considering the freezing temperatures we've been
59 enduring, I am particularly thinking of organizations that under
60 the Selectboard's budget won't be supported by the town in the
61 coming year: Groundworks, which provides overnight shelter for
62 those who live outside; Meals on Wheels, which provides meals
63 for homebound seniors; and SEVCA, which offers emergency
64 heating oil and weatherization services.

65 Overall, almost 17,000 people were assisted by the
66 organizations that applied in the last year; in our town of 12,000
67 residents, this represents, on average, 1.4 services used by each
68 person who lives here. The people being left behind by these cuts
69 are those we pass on the street every day, our neighbors, our
70 friends and family.

71 Most of the applying organizations are facing
72 exceptionally uncertain funding environments, due to the
73 unreliability and instability of federal funding.

74 From federal cuts to mental health and substance use
75 programs, Medicaid and Medicare, SNAP, housing programs, and
76 special education, our local organizations can no longer rely on
77 previously dependable funding streams. Our state government is
78 shuffling funds as best it can, and many of us have maxed out our
79 capacity for individual giving.

80 In this environment, the town had the opportunity to
81 heroically do its part in bridging the gap and keeping these
82 services and organizations — most of which operate with small
83 budgets — afloat.

84 It is an opportunity that the Selectboard abandoned,
85 joining the ranks of capricious and unreliable funders of these
86 absolutely vital services.

87 * * *

88 “TAXES ARE THE price we pay for a civilized society,” the
89 saying goes. I have no children, yet I gladly pay taxes that fund
90 public education — both because it’s the right thing to do, and
91 because an educated public contributes to a better society for all.

92 The same goes for these human services; regardless of
93 whether an individual taxpayer uses any of these services, our
94 whole community is served by their existence.

95 This isn’t “forced charity” as some claim — the purpose
96 of taxes is to serve the public good, not just the services we
97 ourselves use or most champion.

98 * * *

99 TOWN MANAGER John Potter has estimated that spending
100 the full amount allocated by RTM for human services would cost
101 homeowners \$55.75 in taxes per median assessed home.

102 For those of us with stable housing and heat in this
103 freezing weather, surely this modest contribution to public funds
104 that assist people without housing — along with thousands of
105 vulnerable residents in other ways — is appropriate and just.

106 As a taxpayer, I share concerns about the rising expenses
107 in our town, but “solving” our problems by zeroing out a vital
108 fund amounting to less than 2% of our overall budget and less
109 than \$60 in tax burden is nothing less than cynical.

110 The Selectboard’s responsibility is to care for all of
111 Brattleboro’s residents; this week, it failed in that responsibility.

#####END TEXT#####

Bio/COATTAIL:

#####BEGIN BIO/COATTAIL#####

112 **SARAH TURBOW** is a clinical social worker, an
113 organizer, and a member of the Human Services Committee. This
114 piece does not represent the opinions of the Committee as a
115 whole.

#####END BIO/COATTAIL#####

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LOGLINE (SOCIAL MEDIA):

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