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Notes from editor (not for publication):



HEADLINE ELEMENTS:

####BEGIN HED####

1 Community in action

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####BEGIN SUBHED####

2 Volunteers created the Bellows Falls ski tow. They've also
3 kept the free municipal community ski area going for more than
4 70 years.

####END SUBHED####

5 TEXT BODY:

####BEGIN TEXT####

6 One of Bellows Falls's many unique features is its ski
7 trail, complete with an old-school rope tow, a warming hut with
8 a wood stove, and lights for night skiing.

9 The Bellows Falls Municipal Snow Tow — a 200-foot-tall
10 hill with two trails, a 950-foot rope tow, and lights for night skiing

11 — has been a part of the town for over 70 years, making it one of
12 the oldest continually operating ski slopes in Vermont.

13 The Recreation Department and its various facilities —
14 including the ski area — sit on the forest and pastureland that the
15 town purchased from James Williams in 1914. Williams Terrace,
16 the street to the Rec Area, is named after this family.

17 Keeping the ski hill operational has always been a
18 challenge, but this year, after opening on Feb. 4, it has already
19 been up and running for more days than the last several winters
20 combined.

21 Last year, it opened for two or three days, but was unable
22 to open from 2022 to 2024 due to snow conditions and the
23 pandemic.

24 The Rec Area, also known locally as the Playground, is
25 centrally located in the village. With an outdoor pool,
26 playground, picnic area, ball fields, two basketball courts, two
27 tennis courts, and two pickleball courts, in addition to the ski and
28 sledding hills, people can easily walk from the Village for
29 seasonal swimming, basketball, tennis, ball games, and more.

30 **Back to regular operation**

31 Rockingham Parks and Recreation Director Jarrod James,
32 who oversees the entire Rec Area, said he plans to have the ski
33 tow open this winter on a regular schedule — Fridays under the
34 lights from 4 to 8 p.m., and Sundays from noon to 4 p.m. — as
35 long as there is sufficient snow.

36 James just took the interim recreation director position in
37 late November and hopes to have the job permanently. Like
38 many of the people working for or volunteering with the
39 Recreation Department, he worked there when he was in high
40 school and college as a lifeguard and at the ski tow.

41 He is one of many local residents who as kids worked as
42 lifeguards or helped run the rec center and ski tow when they
43 grew up. A lot of them, now with their own families, come back

44 to volunteer with the Recreation Department and provide adult
45 supervision.

46 James hopes to get the winter recreation programs going
47 as fully as possible. This year's exceptionally cold winter with a
48 few good early snowstorms, including one with well over a foot
49 of snow, has the winter skiing program off to a good start.

50 A hill for sledding next to the ski slope is also open. For
51 many years, the town has set up a skating rink as well. James says
52 he didn't have time to do so this year, but he plans on having an
53 operating skating rink in the years to come.

54 Another big plus for the small mountain is the cost. With
55 a typical day-pass lift ticket for one of the big ski resorts in
56 Vermont averages \$100 to \$200, skiing here, while a bit more
57 primitive, is free, with donations accepted.

58 Volunteer Torben Larsen, of Westminster, an avid
59 Scandinavian skier, says that, for him, the relaxed atmosphere at
60 the Bellows Falls Ski Tow is priceless.

61 At the big mountains, he said, "there are big crowds,
62 long lines and people cutting in line. People aren't always so
63 happy. But here, there is a sense of community. There is niceness.
64 Instead of cutting in line, people wave you to get in front of them!
65 Here, it is all smiles."

66 Larsen also laughed about the fact that it is old school
67 skiing, with one of the volunteers noting that learning to take the
68 rope tow up the hill can require as much skill as knowing how to
69 ski down it.

70 James said that having ski equipment and proper
71 instructions is often a deterrent for young people learning to ski.
72 He said that the Recreation Department is looking for skiers and
73 businesses to donate skis, snowboards, poles, and boots so that
74 they will be available for kids to use. Volunteer instructors are
75 also needed.

76 Anyone with equipment or instruction skills they are
77 willing to donate to the community should contact the
78 department at 802-463-9732 or email recreation@rockbf.org.

A century of community

making it work

Two things control whether the trails are open and the tow is running. The first, of course, is snow. A snowless winter, which happens from time to time and with increasing frequency in recent years, means no skiing.

To address that, James said he has heard that the larger ski areas might have snow-making machinery available to loan to community ski areas like the one in Bellows Falls. He said he'll be investigating that possibility.

The second factor is finding staff and volunteers to operate the tow and warming hut.

Generations of parents and other volunteers have been the backbone of much of the work of the Recreation Department, including running the ski tow. Volunteers, some now in their older years, also pass on a great deal of institutional knowledge about how to keep things running smoothly and well-maintained.

The skiing area portion of the Rockingham Recreation Center has been associated with winter sports for over a century — a decade before the invention of the ski tow and the advent of downhill skiing.

A section of the Bellows Falls ski hill known as The Knoll had a ski jump built there as early as 1922, very near the time of the creation of the historic Harris Hill ski jump in Brattleboro, which is considered the oldest in the state and is still in operation. In the 1920s, people seeing skiing and ski jumping take off in Brattleboro were inspired to create similar opportunities in Bellows Falls.

Ski jumping was a much more common sport in the U.S. in the 1920s than it is today. The first Winter Olympics in 1924 included ski jumping competitions. Many Vermont towns built ski jumps. Several were in Windham County, with at least two in Rockingham. In addition to the one at the Recreation Area in

112 Bellows Falls, by 1925 Vermont Academy in Saxtons River also
113 had one.

114 Ski jumping became so popular that, in 1923, Bellows
115 Falls formed its own ski club, the Polar Bears. The group hosted a
116 three-day winter carnival in the village that year, complete with
117 ski jumping events, snowshoe races, and hockey games all held
118 at the Bellows Falls Ski Bowl at the Recreation Area.

119 This first winter carnival drew 700 people to a winter
120 festival dance at the Armory building on Westminster Street on
121 one night of the festival. In 1924, the Polar Bears — by that time
122 with more than 100 members — hosted what *The History of the*
123 *Town of Rockingham, Vermont, Including the Villages of Bellows*
124 *Falls, Saxtons River, Rockingham, Cambridgeport and*
125 *Bartonsville, 1907-1957* calls “the biggest ski meet ever held up
126 to that time.”

127 That year the event officially became the annual Winter
128 Carnival and Vermont State Championship Ski Meet held at the
129 Bellows Falls Ski Bowl. The three-day event with then-Gov.
130 Redfield Proctor Jr. attending. Well-known skiers competed,
131 including athletes from Dartmouth College and other parts of the
132 country, some of whom were world champions in their sports.

133 There were junior and men and women skating, skiing,
134 and ski jumping competitions, snowshoe races, and hockey
135 matches. Motorcycles pulled skiers through the streets of the
136 village in a sport called skijoring.

137 That year, 800 people showed up for the Mah Jongg Ball
138 held again at the Armory’s large gymnasium. A full orchestra
139 played, a Carnival Queen was elected, and the local history
140 called it “the biggest affair of its kind that Bellows Falls had ever
141 had.”

142 Building on their early success, in 1926 the Polar Bears
143 held a four-day carnival at the ski jump, with a Tri-State
144 Championship competition. That year’s events also included
145 toboggan races and sleigh rides. Other winter carnivals were held

146 in 1929 and 1931, with 14 regional high schools and academies
147 participating.

148 But, by 1934, the Polar Bears Club was in tough financial
149 straits, and, by 1938 the Ski Bowl, a more structured and larger
150 downhill ski area between Bellows Falls and nearby Saxtons
151 River Village, was operating.

152 It was one of the earliest and more sophisticated ski
153 areas for the rapidly expanding Vermont downhill ski industry. It
154 drew hundreds of skiers daily, bringing busloads to the town from
155 as far away as Boston and New York City.

156 Started by Robert Hogarth on his farm off Route 121, it
157 opened in 1937, offering four trails designed by Charles Proctor,
158 who would go on to do the same for many major ski areas
159 around New England. Many of the Snow Bowl's trails and slopes
160 used the former farm's open pastureland.

161 A small bus with tire chains would shuttle skiers and
162 their equipment from a large parking lot off Route 121 up the
163 primitive Ski Bowl Road to the base of a 1,000-foot rope tow.
164 Starting where the rope tow dropped them at the top of the
165 mountain, several narrow trails cut through the woods.

166 There were also two beginner's practice slopes with a ski
167 instructor, and other wide slopes as well. A skier could go down
168 to the bottom of the ski tow, or if there was sufficient snow,
169 continue skiing down the mountain to the parking lot and take
170 the shuttle bus back.

171 The Ski Bowl had a trail map, first aid hut, and a
172 warming house that served food and drinks. Volunteers from the
173 Polar Bears Club helped to create the trails there as well as their
174 work at the Bellows Falls ski area.

175 Despite the sophistication of its operation for the time,
176 the Ski Bowl lasted for only a few years, closing in 1941 when
177 the Hogarth family moved.

Years of transition

178

179 By that time World War II had begun, and gas rationing
180 made it much more difficult and expensive for skiers to travel
181 from outside the area to Vermont.

182 The Ski Bowl is now considered one of the estimated
183 175 “lost” ski areas that once operated in Vermont but are now
184 closed. In less than 50 years, this entire ski area disappeared
185 under new forest growth and any remnants of it are hard to find.

186 During those years older residents remember that it was
187 not unusual for kids from Bellows Falls or Saxtons River to walk
188 or ski the more than 2 miles from their villages to the ski area
189 between the two villages.

190 The downhill skiing bug had taken hold among the
191 locals, and after the Hogarths left, efforts were made to keep the
192 Ski Bowl operating.

193 At the Bellows Falls Ski Club, revived in 1947 with more
194 than 40 members, a jeep was now used to shuttle skiers up Ski
195 Bowl Road to the rope tow. But interest was difficult to sustain,
196 money was tight, and the club again disbanded within a few
197 years.

198 But by 1953, local young people wanted to create their
199 own ski area by expanding the trails where the ski jump had been
200 at the public recreation area in Bellows Falls. They were able to
201 get the municipality involved.

202 Volunteers helped to clear the slope, and the Model A
203 motor that ran the Ski Bowl tow was brought down to Bellows
204 Falls for its rope tow. Exactly 30 years after skiing first started up
205 in Bellows Falls, the Bellows Falls Municipal Snow Tow began
206 running in the same location.

207 From the beginning, the ski area has been a community
208 project. In 1953, Municipal Manager Cecil Bissonnette was
209 involved in the operation, as were nearby homeowners Thelma
210 and Jack Bronk and Nat Morrison. A four-person ski patrol
211 supervised the area with the help of Village Trustees.

212 Volunteer and local history enthusiast Lonnie Lisai, who
213 is working on a history of area skiing with Ellen Howard Golec,
214 said that the original Model A motor was replaced in 1960 with
215 the current motor that powers the rope tow. Over 66 years, the
216 motor has faithfully hauled thousands of area skiers up the slopes
217 and continues working “just fine,” he said.

218 Lisai, who has volunteered at the ski tow for decades,
219 described several ways in which the community has kept the
220 operation going. Recent posts on social media regarding the
221 history of the ski tow and its seasonal reopening last week got
222 hundreds of comments from people reminiscing about their
223 decades of memories of skiing, sledding, and skating at the Rec
224 area.

225 In the early 1990s, the ski tow did not operate for a few
226 years due to lack of snow. Then a large group of volunteers
227 replaced lights, got the tow motor running, and groomed all the
228 slopes. Skiers were able to hit the slopes there when decent snow
229 arrived in the winter of 1994-95.

230 In 2000, operator Ross Martin and a large group of other
231 local volunteers were able to get contributions from the town and
232 support from a group of Ben & Jerry’s employees to tear down a
233 no-longer-safe warming hut. The community volunteers then
234 replaced it with the current 20 foot × 20 foot building.

235 On Feb. 4, the Ski Tow began its 73rd year of operation.
236 Lisai noted that even after nearly three quarters of a century,
237 “local officials and volunteers continue to be the lifeblood of the
238 ski area.”

239 On the night of Jan. 31, he pointed to the handful of
240 Recreation Department workers and volunteers at the ski tow last
241 Friday night.

242 “These are the people that keep this going,” Lisai said.
243 “It’s a pretty special part of this community.”

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BIO/COATTAIL:

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