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**Notes from editor (not for publication):**



HEADLINE ELEMENTS:

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1 Senator delivers \$598,000 for new fire station in Saxtons  
2 River

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3 U.S. Sen. Peter Welch visits Bellows Falls to announce  
4 the news; project is one of 38 in Vt. to receive federal funding

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5 TEXT BODY:

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6 On Feb. 20, U.S. Sen. Peter Welch, D-Vermont, got to do  
7 what he says is “a part of my job that I love, talking to regular  
8 Vermonters.”

9 His morning meeting with over a dozen “regular  
10 Vermonters” at the Bellows Falls Municipal Fire Station had the  
11 added bonus of Welch handing over \$598,000 to aid the

12 Rockingham Municipal Fire Department build a new fire station  
13 with expanded emergency services in Saxtons River.

14 Welch is the ranking member of the Senate Agriculture  
15 Subcommittee on Rural Development, Energy, and Credit. He  
16 recently announced that he secured \$58.68 million in federal  
17 funds to support 38 Vermont projects, including several projects  
18 in southern Vermont, following the passage of 11 annual  
19 appropriations bills for fiscal year 2026.

20 He nominated project recipients through the  
21 Congressionally Directed Spending (CDS) process, a bipartisan  
22 evaluation to select projects that “can promote economic  
23 development, infrastructure, public safety, education, health care  
24 initiatives, and other worthy investments in communities across  
25 the country,” according to the Senate Committee on  
26 Appropriations’ [website](#).

27 “Congressionally Directed Spending projects direct  
28 taxpayer dollars right back to projects that strengthen and  
29 improve our cities and towns,” Welch said.

30 Several southern Vermont communities will benefit, in  
31 addition to Bellows Falls, to the tune of over \$6 million. Other  
32 projects in the area benefiting from the federal funding include  
33 \$3.25 million for the Brattleboro Development Credit  
34 Corporation to create a new industrial park in Brattleboro that  
35 Welch says, “will spur economic development and add up to 350  
36 new jobs in the next seven years.”

37 Woodstock will receive \$1 million to upgrade its 40-  
38 year-old main wastewater treatment facility. Hartford will receive  
39 \$774,000 for its police department to upgrade its emergency  
40 communications infrastructure, modernize its emergency  
41 response capabilities, and improve dispatch capacity.

42 And \$373,000 is earmarked for Turning Point of  
43 Springfield to address substance misuse in rural, high-risk  
44 communities by expanding peer recovery coaching and bringing  
45 community organizations together to engage with the issue.

46 "A new infusion of federal funds will soon help Vermont  
47 create new jobs, update outdated infrastructure and emergency  
48 response systems, and support folks recovering from substance  
49 misuse," Welch said.

## 50 **Fire and EMS consolidation**

### 51 **moves ahead**

52 Welch said he was happy to provide help for the recent  
53 consolidation of three fire departments into the single  
54 Rockingham Fire and Rescue Department (RFRD), with the three  
55 fire stations and EMS headquarters, in Bellows Falls, Saxtons  
56 River, and Rockingham, respectively, under the management of  
57 one organization.

58 One of the issues moving the consolidation was that the  
59 Saxtons River fire station had been condemned. Its location in a  
60 flood zone has made finding a new site imperative.

61 Attending the meeting with Welch was Shaun McGinnis,  
62 chief of the consolidated fire departments; former Saxtons River  
63 Volunteer Fire Department Chief Art Smith; EMS Chief Nick  
64 Cushman, and several other members of the fire department and  
65 emergency services.

66 Also attending were Selectboard Chair Peter Golec, Vice-  
67 Chair Bonnie North, board member John Dunbar, Village Trustee  
68 Paul Obuchowski, and other town officials.

69 Welch acknowledged that there are "a lot of things  
70 happening" in Rockingham, and he applauded the town for  
71 making "the decision to make Saxtons River a better community."

72 "What's more important than the fire service?" the  
73 lawmaker asked.

74 Citizens assume that when "they call the fire department,  
75 someone will show up," any day or any time, said Welch, who  
76 relished the idea of getting tax dollars to improve fire and  
77 emergency services.

78 "Nothing makes me feel better," he said.

79           McGinnis said the town appreciated Welch’s support.  
80 Golec said that the town has a building in Saxtons River in mind  
81 “that we can upgrade to what we need.”

82           Welch said he appreciated what a challenge it had been  
83 to the community to consolidate three departments into one.

84           “That’s hard,” he said. “People are invested in their local  
85 organizations.”

86           While the fire department personnel at the meeting  
87 agreed that the transition had been difficult and emotional, Smith  
88 was optimistic.

89           “It’s working for most of us,” he said.

90           Dunbar said that there was “a lot of emotion and history”  
91 in the consolidation discussion, but town officials held several  
92 public meetings and “just continued to put facts out there.”

93           At the 2025 Annual Town Meeting, with a large voter  
94 turnout, the article to consolidate the three fire departments into  
95 one passed by a margin of nearly 2 to 1.

96           “I can’t thank the board enough for sticking to their guns  
97 for consolidation,” said longtime firefighter Tony James. “It was a  
98 long time coming. I couldn’t have asked for a better outcome.”

99           Cushman told Welch that while the EMS department has  
100 faced staffing issues, 30 EMS members have now been certified in  
101 the town.

102           “I’m very grateful for the merger that has happened,”  
103 Cushman said.

104           Welch said that getting better payments to EMS services  
105 from Medicare was one of his legislative goals. Medicare often  
106 doesn’t pay EMS for on-scene responses — only when a patient is  
107 transported to a hospital.

108           Welch said that the reality is that on-scene services save  
109 Medicare “a lot of money” if EMS personnel can help a patient  
110 avoid hospitalization.

111           “For me it’s about helping community services,” Welch  
112 said. “It’s absolutely important.”

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## Three Selectboard candidates

### want to revisit consolidation

Voters will get a chance to be heard again on the consolidation issue in the Selectboard races for a single, three-year seat and a pair of one-year seats to be decided in voting on Tuesday, March 3.

There are eight candidates for the three seats, and a candidates' forum was held on Feb. 22 in the Rockingham Free public Library.

Three of the candidates, William Crowther, David Barrett, and Larry White, are all former members of the Rockingham Volunteer Fire Department (RVFD).

Of those three, only Crowther showed up for the forum, and he spoke for a few minutes at the beginning when the candidates were introducing themselves.

He said he was there representing the RVFD and that a vote for himself, Barrett or White would be a vote to shut down a town project restoring the historic depot train station into a commercial property and a vote to reinstate the RVFD as a separate entity.

After making a couple of allegations against the current Selectboard, Crowther said that Barrett and White had not come because they felt it would be a hostile crowd.

Crowther then stated that he could see "hostile faces" in the crowd and he left, without answering any questions from or interaction with the moderator or the audience.

Two days before, speaking to Welch, Selectboard member Dunbar recounted what he described as one of the most impactful statements at the public meetings that took place before the 2025 merger vote.

Amid the contention, one citizen stood up.

"When my life is on the line, I want one fire department," he said. "I don't want people fighting over who's in charge."

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