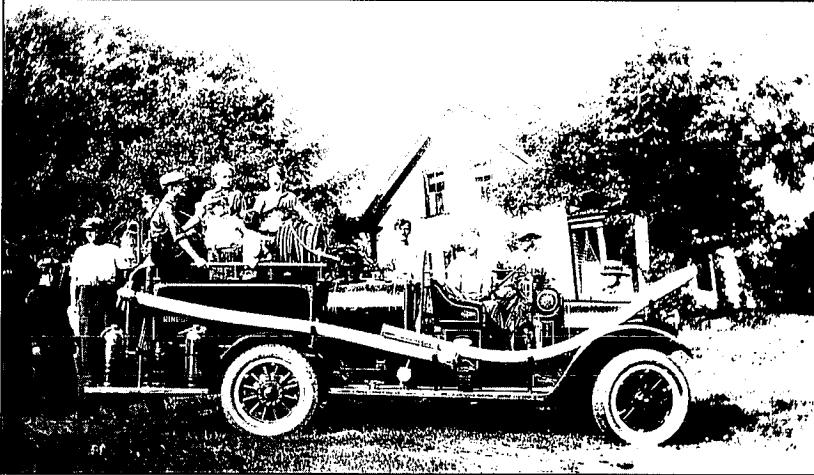


Provide Quality Education & Public Services



Members of the Rindge Volunteer Fire Department in the 1920's. Prior to the "Great Fire" of 1925, Rindge had no formal fire-fighting force (photo courtesy of Rindge Historical Society).

An afternoon with Roland Goddard, Sr., or "Rollie" as most people know him, provides some insight into the life of a dedicated public servant. Rollie served the town between 1930 and 1980 in five different capacities. He was town treasurer for forty-seven years, and also served as town clerk for thirty-seven of those years. "I would get out of bed at 4 a.m. and milk the cows before leaving for work in Winchendon. When I got home, the cows were waiting to be milked again, and then, after a bite to eat, my wife and I would open the house for town business." In those days everyone in town turned out to help fight a fire. Roland joined the fire department in the 1940s, and continued as a volunteer fireman for the next twenty-seven years.

Asked how he inherited his spirit of volunteerism, he said simply, "I was available." At age 99, Roland also knows a thing or two about time—in part because for decades he volunteered to wind the town clock once a week. This job he passed on to his son Roland Jr., who is now in the process of training his own son.

For most of us, the quality of our public services—fire and rescue, road and park maintenance, public education—are not part of our daily concerns. We never rehearse for a serious injury or a chimney fire, but when the unexpected happens, we want trained emergency personnel to be at our doorstep within minutes. Similarly, most residents don't visit the local school unless they have a child enrolled, and people seldom inspect their roads until they have suffered some mishap. Public services are out of sight and out of mind. When they do command our attention, all too often it's a matter of life and death.

Like most towns in the State of New Hampshire, Rindge has relied on volunteers to keep the town running within a budget it can afford. However, the services provided by the town, and how they are funded, have changed over time. For example, schooling used to be the responsibility of the family, but by 1874 there were eleven district schools in town. In 2001-02 it cost on average \$6,800 to educate each child who attended Conant High School. Likewise, prior to the "Great Fire" in 1925, the town had no formal, organized fire department, a public service that currently uses \$210,000 of the monies we raise in taxes annually. While no one today would argue against the necessity of services such as police, fire, education, and road maintenance, many residents worry about the cost of providing them. A number of factors influence these costs, including inflation, the growing number of commercial and residential properties that require services, and implementation of federal and state regulations. And while what we expect from public services has

expanded, the way we fund these services — revenues from property taxes — has remained basically the same for quite some time. As we grow as a town, residents will need to decide how many of our needs can be met by volunteers or even by part-time employees without compromising the quality of services.

People who support this approach want a town that is safe, neighborly, and enthusiastic in its support for children and the elderly. They believe that making a commitment to provide these services is essential for maintaining a healthy and vital community. This approach recognizes that comprehensive planning and consistent implementation are needed to ensure that our tax dollars will be spent in a wise and timely manner. We need to explore various funding mechanisms for financing large projects and recognize that it takes continuous planning to achieve quality educational and municipal facilities. Alternate methods of funding and a sense of shared trust in our elected officials are essential. But even then, the town government can't do it all. We also need a strong force of volunteers, residents willing to contribute time as well as money to their town.

Control Expenses by Controlling Growth

During the building boom of the 1980s many residents cried "Foul!" as their tax bills increased to pay for the public services of a rapidly growing community. One way to control many of these costs is to control growth. Rindge currently has a mechanism in place that allows the town some control over the rate of residential development. Adopted in 1987, the Phased Development Ordinance is designed to prevent residential growth from escalating at a rate that would place an unfair burden on the town's ability to pay for services. The Ordinance gives the Planning Board the power to limit the number of building permits in large subdivisions (ten or more lots) to 10% of the total number approved per year. For example, if Rindge approves a forty home subdivision, it can insist that the construction be undertaken at a rate of four houses per year over the next ten years. Although the ordinance was consistently applied between 1988 and 1990, it has been significantly relaxed since that time. Supporters of this approach believe the current Planning Board needs to formalize a process for tracking

trends in development and their impact on public services in town. Using the data they collect, the board should also enforce the Phased Development Ordinance in a rigorous and consistent manner in order to help control the rate of new residential construction and keep pace with residents' ability to pay for expanded recreational facilities, new classrooms, and the police, fire and highway equipment needed to maintain new roads.

Provide New Funding Mechanisms

Good municipal planning involves flexibility as well as vision. Proponents of this approach advocate exploring supplemental sources of funding, and creating greater flexibility in current funding mechanisms. For example, residents should seriously consider using bonding, when appropriate, in addition to the capital-reserve method traditionally used by Rindge. In certain economic climates, particularly when interest rates are low, it may make economic sense to borrow money to issue bonds for larger projects. Most of our neighboring towns currently include bonding as one of their funding options. The benefits of bonding include the ability to construct and use the facility soon after the need is identified, the ability to spread costs over a longer period of repayment, and the ability to collect impact fees over a longer period of time (see Figure 8).

Another method of supplementing town revenues to support public services is to charge impact fees. These are fees imposed on new development to help pay for the additional town expenses caused by the construction. Only the costs attributable to growth, as it relates to the use or expansion of capital facilities, can be assessed. Impact fees in New Hampshire are commonly used to support funding for schools, roads, and recreation facilities, but can also be used to fund fire and police protection, water and sewer treatment, the library, and construction of new school buildings or any capital improvement that might occur on existing structures. The Impact Fee Ordinance must conform to State regulations and must be based on a reasonably updated Master Plan and a Capital Improvements Plan (CIP), which provides a schedule for improving or replacing the physical assets of the town.

Before the town can legally assess impact fees, a “reasonably updated” version of the Master Plan is required. According to Jeff Porter, Assistant Director of Southwest Region Planning Commission, “A healthy town updates its Master Plan every five years, and ten years provides an outside limit to what might be defined as reasonably updated.” Rindge’s Master Plan was updated during the late 1980s and formally adopted in 1990. Updating our current Master Plan is a necessary first step to managing growth and the costs associated with it.

In Rindge, impact fees could be used to help fund a number of planned or potential projects. At Town Meeting in 2002, voters approved the first phase of a plan to purchase land and construct a new highway facility. Earlier that same year, a study of town facilities conducted by MNA Consulting Group recommended the construction of a combined police/fire station in the near future. If an impact fee ordinance were to be adopted, the funds collected could help to offset the cost of these capital improvements. In addition, although the

proposal for a new high school has failed in each of the last three years, paying for repairs to the existing facility continues to be a need. Tension over this issue has increased, in part because during the same three years, Rindge has experienced another period of rapid residential development.

Strengthen Communication Networks

The key to community vitality is effective communication. Rindge has made strides in enhancing its communication networks in recent years. However, the apparent demise of the *Rindge Connection* indicates that additional efforts will be necessary in this area. Franklin Pierce College, and the new Fitzwater Center for Communications in particular, may be able to play a significant role in connecting all Rindge citizens. Using print and audio media, students and community members could begin to work together to develop programs that keep residents informed, invite conversations on controversial issues, and provide electronic as well as traditional methods for disseminating local news.

As the introduction to this approach indicates, Rindge has also had an illustrious history of civic engagement and active volunteerism. The town continues to rely heavily on volunteers and hourly on-call employees, particularly in the area of fire fighting and emergency medical services. Since the tragic events of September 11, 2001, our appreciation of those willing to risk their lives to save ours has grown. Nevertheless, many of these are low paying or volunteer positions (see Figure 9). This approach recognizes that for Rindge residents to continue to feel safe, healthy, and comfortable, these positions must be supported with adequate training, funding and equipment. Local civic organizations and the media should play a more active role in celebrating past service and increasing public awareness about the range of experience and level of commitment and competence of those who serve. Creating a clearinghouse for all service groups, including those in the schools, to network might be one first step to enhance public awareness and increase the effectiveness of these programs. It would also be a way to connect those who need assistance with volunteers who can provide it.

Impact Fees: In 1991 New Hampshire passed a law that allows towns the right to charge impact fees. Impact fees are defined as “a fee or assessment imposed upon development, including subdivision, building construction or other land use change in order to help meet the needs occasioned by that development for the construction or improvement of capital facilities owned or operated by the municipality.” Only the costs attributable to growth, as it relates to the consumption or expansion of capital facilities, can be assessed.

Capital Reserve: A traditional method of funding in which a reserve fund is created for specific capital expenses (i.e., highway dumptruck, police station) and added to each year until such time as the purchase is approved and monies are appropriated and withdrawn from the fund for the purchase. These funds may cover the entire amount of the appropriation or supplement funds raised that year from taxes.

Municipal Bonding: A funding mechanism in which the town elects to borrow money for a fixed rate of time to pay for a capital expense. The choice to bond means that the town pays both principal and interest payment charges. Bonding allows impact fees to be collected over a longer period of time.

Capital Improvements Plan (CIP): This provides a schedule for improving or replacing the physical assets of the town. Most plans cover a five-to-seven year period and are updated every year. Rindge’s CIP was last updated in 2001 and includes a schedule for constructing the new town highway facility, replacing various pieces of large equipment and creating a fund for planning the new public safety building that combines police and fire services. CIPs may soon become state mandated and, if this happens, towns will be required to include all physical assets, along with scheduled depreciation, on their balance sheets.

Figure 8. Glossary of Municipal Funding Terms

Hourly Employees (benefits)

Full Time Firefighter
Highway Department Personnel
Police Department Personnel
Transfer Station Personnel

Hourly Employees (no benefits)

Animal Control Officer
Children's Librarian
Code Enforcement Officer
Deputy Fire Chiefs (on call)
Firefighters (on call)
EMT's (on call)
Library Staff

Elected & Appointed Officials**(hourly)**

Ballot Clerks
Moderator
Planning Board Members
Supervisors of the Checklist
Zoning Board of Adjustment
Members

Elected & Appointed Officials**(stipend)**

Emergency Management Director
Fire Chief
Health Officer
Overseer of Welfare
Selectmen
Town Treasurer

Elected & Appointed Officials**(strictly volunteer)**

Budget Advisory Committee
Conservation Commission
History Committee
Library Volunteers
Recreation Committee and
Coaches
Recycling Swap Shop Staff
Town Constable
Town/Gown Committee
Trustees of the Trust Funds

Finally, elected officials need to strengthen and expand their communication networks. One idea might be to establish a Trend Tracking Committee. The goal of the committee would be to study and assess how potential changes in rules and regulations related to natural resource protection, zoning and development might affect the capacity and delivery of public services in Rindge. The Trend Tracking Committee would formalize opportunities for interactions among members of the Planning Board, Police and Fire Departments, Conservation Commission, Recreation Department, Budget Advisory Committee, Code Enforcement and Health Officers, and Town Administrator.

Strengthen School-Community Relations

Rindge residents have frequently expressed their desire to have stronger connections with their local schools. People, both with and without school age children, admit to feeling "outside the loop" in the educational decision-making process. No one argues that good schools are of utmost importance to a community, but residents want to know that the money they pay in property taxes is wisely spent. Being involved in the educational process provides taxpayers with an opportunity to see how their money is being used.

While the State continues to grapple with the issue of defining an adequate education, residents can improve their schools by getting involved at the local level in volunteer positions — getting to know their schools from the inside. Programs that provide opportunities for residents to mentor, coach, tutor, or serve as classroom aids need to be restructured so that they can be accessible to more community members, including retired people, parents, and business

leaders. Increasing the number of volunteers will help reinforce important links between schools and the communities they serve, and improve educational opportunities in the process.

Most residents applaud the efforts of School Board members. However, many in Rindge wish that there were additional ways to talk about their concerns beyond formal public hearings. Public forums, particularly those where residents, board members, education professionals and students can talk on an equal footing, are one way of achieving this. Such forums would need to be thoughtfully structured and should include neutral moderators who will encourage participants to speak their mind without fear of repercussion.

Include the Entire Community

Quality public services must meet the needs of the entire community. For example, elderly residents who wish to stay in Rindge or young people who are just beginning to save currently have few options because today's low-density communities favor a limited number of housing types. As a result, senior citizens or first-time buyers — for whom the typical multi-acre home site is not a feasible option — find it difficult to find affordable housing. The town needs to actively pursue affordable housing options through Community Block Grants, HUD funds and other forms of financing. We need to expand Rindge's relationship with agencies such as Southwestern Community Services and Cheshire Housing Trust, two local non-profit housing developers committed to affordable senior housing options.

Finally, there are a number of potential public services that seem too large or too costly for Rindge to pursue alone. We need to cooperate with other towns in the region to address these issues. The success of the Regional Prosecutor Program, which provides local police departments with a high level of expertise, might pave the way for other regional solutions around issues such as professional planning, code enforcement, and youth and senior services. Being a part of groups like the regional Transportation Advisory Board would help Rindge work with other communities to create regional bike paths, foster car-pooling, and explore a range of public transportation options.

Figure 9. Selected List of Town of Rindge Employment Categories