

Vergennes Township

A Place Where People Like to Live
www.vergennestwp.org



10381 Bailey Dr., P.O. Box 208, Lowell, MI 49331

897-5671

Hours: M, W, F – 9 A.M.–3 P.M.

WINTER 2010

*Township Board Meetings are held the third Monday of every month at 7:00 P.M. in the Township Hall.
Planning Commission Meetings are held the first Monday of every month at 7:00 P.M. in the Township Hall.*

SUPERVISOR: TIM WITTENBACH
TREASURER: JEAN HOFFMAN
CLERK: MARI STONE
TRUSTEES: VERN NAUTA
ALLAN BAIRD

CLERK'S CORNER

by Mari Stone, Vergennes Township Clerk

I'm writing this in early November, and if it's really cold as you are reading this, try to remember the stretch we had of 65 to 70 degree days. It's so nice to open the windows to enjoy a fresh breeze through the house – even though you have to put up with "The Invasion of the Lady Bugs."

Let's see, what's new around here? We updated the Lighting Ordinance, and our Zoning Administrator, Jeanne Vandersloot, has more information about that on the back page. We are working on a refresher for our Township Web Site. There should be some changes made by the time this reaches you, so check it out at www.vergennestwp.org. Our goal is to make it even easier to locate and use the information you need from your local government.

We are saying goodbye to one of our long-time and faithful public servants; Vern Nauta, Township Board Trustee and former Planning Commissioner, will be leaving the Board effective December 31st. Vern and his wife, Gay, have sold their farm and will retire to a life of travel and spending even more time with their busy family. The good news is that they are staying here in Vergennes Township, and their farm has been sold to another local farmer. You might be happy to know that the farm land that Vern and Gay have so highly treasured will remain in agricultural production. I know they are, and so am I. We will fill Vern's seat with an appointment, and this person will need to then participate in the Primary and General Elections in 2010. If you are interested in serving on the Board as Trustee, please send me a letter of interest and a resume. We will be holding interviews in January and making the appointment at our February 15th, 2010 Board meeting.

The High Speed Internet project was slowed down a bit this last summer when we were joined by Ada and Lowell Townships. The up side of that wait is that an application for Federal stimulus funds by a potential vendor has received preliminary approval because the vendor could include data from all three townships. They are awaiting final approvals, and should they be successful, the company intends to install a tower to serve the entire area with WiMax service. This kind of signal is stronger than anything currently available in our area, and will be much better at reaching our residents who are wireless-challenged by rolling terrain and abundant foliage. I'm no expert, but if you are

considering updating your technology hardware/software, you may want to ask about WiMax compatibility.

'Feeling the pinch':

How state budget cuts impact our township

A township is not unlike any other person or entity dealing with today's economic realities—we're all "feeling the pinch." However, when it comes to making dollars stretch the furthest, townships have long been recognized for their efforts in minimizing expenses and maximizing value in public administration at the local level.

According to state statutes, Michigan townships are responsible for carrying out three main functions: assessing property, collecting taxes and conducting elections. Programs and services such as police, fire and emergency medical services, libraries, etc., require additional sources of revenue to operate. These are funded by many other methods, such as cost-sharing with other governmental units, millages, user fees, grants and public borrowing (bonds).

Recent state budget cuts are impacting townships in different ways. Here in Vergennes, because we are on the small end of the scale, we do not receive any statutory revenue sharing from the state. We do receive constitutional revenue sharing, which went down 5.7% over the last year, as it has in each of the last few years. This funding is based on population, and our population has increased, so we are serving more while receiving less. Other revenue sources for the township include permit and administrative fees. These have also diminished as the economy has slowed, but we still need to keep employees and programs in place, which have constant costs. We have also seen some erosion in our investment funds, which historically have been deemed healthy for a small municipality.

Vergennes Township is dealing with budget cuts by deferring raises, equipment purchases and any unnecessary expenditures. As is our tradition, we will continue to use funds wisely to benefit and serve our community, and will continue to seek innovative, cost-effective ways to carry out essential functions. However, the bottom line remains: You can only do so much with so little. Further cuts, coupled with declining property values, will challenge how local governments—the form of government closest to the people—continue to best serve those whom they represent.



FROM THE TREASURER



WINTER TAX 2009

Jean Hoffman, Treasurer

Merry Christmas and Happy New Year – The office will be closed on Wednesday the 23rd and Friday the 25th for the Christmas holiday. The office will reopen on December 28th.

Taxes are due February 14, 2010. The 14th falls on a Sunday therefore you may pay them without penalty on Monday the 15th. **IMPORTANT:** Please mail early.

Postmarks are not accepted for due date!! We are not responsible for delays in the postal system. Please use the return envelope provided with your tax statements. If you would like a receipt, please enclose the whole bill and a self-addressed envelope. We will stamp the upper part and return it to you.

Remember that you can make partial payments from the first of December through February 15th. Payments received after the due date must include the penalty and interest. State law prohibits the township from waiving these charges. You may pay summer and winter 2009 taxes at the township through February 26th. All unpaid taxes will be turned over to the county treasurer on March 1, 2010.

The last day to pay your taxes in 2009 will be December 30th.

**Make checks payable to: Vergennes Township Treasurer,
Please do not include dog licenses in the same check.**



ASSESSMENT INFORMATION



Assessment Change Notice and Verification

Assessment Change Notices will be mailed at the end of February 2010. In addition to change of assessment, the notice will indicate:

- if there was a transfer of ownership in 2009;
- if there is a homestead exemption on your property for 2010.

Please review your assessment notice as soon as it arrives. Verify your name and address.

Check to verify that you are receiving a principal residence exemption or qualified agricultural exemption if these apply to your property. If you have any corrections please notify the assessor with the accurate information.

Proposal A Reminders

Property Transfer Affidavits

Any transfer of ownership requires a Property Transfer Affidavit to be filed with the assessor within 45 days of the transfer.

Principal Residence Exemptions

Filing deadline for new exemptions is May 1st of every year. Exemptions take effect the following January 1st, and stay in effect for the entire calendar year. You must rescind your exemption within 90 days of the date you no longer own or occupy the property as your principal residence.

A special note to those who have purchased property during the year

Please be aware that Proposal A does not authorize the assessor to automatically set the assessed value of a property which has sold at one half of the sale price. An individual sale price may or may not be a good indicator of the true cash value of the property for a variety of reasons. Section 27 (5) of the General Property Tax Act states that "the purchase price paid in a transfer of property is not the presumptive true cash value of the property transferred."

The inflation rate established by the State for 2010 is -.30%.



DOG LICENSES



PLEASE MAKE CHECKS PAYABLE TO KENT COUNTY TREASURER

Dog Licenses should be available after the first of the year. The county will be setting new fees for 2010.

Rabies vaccinations and dog licenses are required in Michigan for all dogs four months of age or older.

YOU WILL NEED:

1. **PREPRINTED APPLICATION FORM FROM THE ANIMAL SHELTER**
2. **UPDATED RABIES VACCINATION (IF NEEDED)**
3. **PROOF OF SPAYING OR NEUTERING (IF NEEDED)**

If you do not have preprinted form from the animal shelter, you must have a rabies certification and proof of neutering. Call the shelter at 632-7300 if you have any questions.

****HOME FOR THE HOLIDAYS WISH LIST****

Request from the Kent County Animal Shelter

- *New bags of dog/puppy food
- *New bags of Cat/kitten food
- *Bleach
- *New collars and leashes
- *Laundry detergent
- *Brushes and pet shampoo
- *New Holiday Volunteers
- *New or gently used blankets & towels
- *New dog or cat treats (bring them in personally and hand them out to the animals)
- *Pet store gift certificates
- *Pet toys (new or gently used)

****PLEASE CALL AHEAD 616-632-7300****



LOWELL AREA TRAILWAY/LARA UPDATE



The following is a letter recently published in the Lowell Ledger from Dan Edwards, a Vergennes Township resident who has volunteered countless hours to the Lowell Area Trailway effort. Dan summarized the flurry of LARA's activity over the past year so well, I asked him if I could publish it in our newsletter. I want to take this opportunity to express appreciation to Dan, who is a wonderful example of a dedicated community volunteer and has given richly of his time and talents to see this dream become a reality.....

On a cold snowy night in January 1999, people began arriving for a meeting in the upstairs conference room at Lowell Power and Light Company. I didn't know anyone at the time because I was a newcomer to the area, having lived here less than two years. From the conversations, I began to identify them: the leader was the Superintendent of Lowell Schools, the Clerk from Vergennes Township was there, officials from the City of Lowell and Lowell Township were also there. One fellow was from the YMCA, there were several businessmen, a consultant, and an engineer who seemed to know a lot about bridges. I was just an observer, the only person who responded to a call for volunteers in the newsletter that came with the tax bill. I had no idea that I was about to join these people in a personal mission that would span the next decade.

The topic of the meeting was developing a walking/bicycle trail for the Lowell Area. No one knew exactly where it would go, but there were plenty of ideas. The only restrictions on the project were: 1) It had to connect all three communities; and 2) There would be no tax increase of any kind. These two concepts are the guideposts for the project to this day.

After that night in January, I attended the monthly meetings of this group for the next ten years. Money from the Lowell Community Foundation paid for a study in 2002 that crystallized plans for what would become the Lowell Area Trailway. In 2004, this ad hoc group was formally organized and empowered by independent acts of the three local governments. These acts created the "The Lowell Area Recreation Authority." (LARA). This new status provided the authority to apply for grants, negotiate easements, sign contracts and other actions that would be required for the development of the trail.

Progress was slow for the next few years. The group was all volunteers, so there was never much time to work on the project. There was no money to hire help and no one was quite sure what to do next. Once again, help came from the Lowell Area Community Fund, first in the form of much needed advice. When several of us were presenting to the Board of Directors, it was suggested that we consider hiring a professional fundraiser. They also helpfully suggested that we submit a grant proposal for them to provide funding for that activity. This was the genesis of Trailway Feasibility Study.

The feasibility study was simple enough. The fundraising professional interviewed about 25 community leaders identified by the LARA Board. He described the project to them, which many of them were hearing about it for the first time. He then asked if they supported such a project and whether they or others they knew would be willing to support it financially. Since the LARA Board had been operating in much of a vacuum up to that point, we really didn't know what the answers would be.

The results of the feasibility study were astounding. Not only was there widespread support in the community for a trail, but the estimated potential for fundraising far exceeded what most of us had hoped for. This study provided the affirmation that was needed to give the project momentum.

The feasibility study helped to launch the fundraising campaign that began last year and is still continuing. This campaign has been hugely successful despite a difficult economy. This success is thanks to dedicated volunteers, continuing guidance from our fundraising professional and generous gifts from foundations, clubs, companies and individuals. Once again, the public spirit and generosity present in the Lowell Community is inspiring to behold.

Fundraising paid for more professional help from a local engineer whose firm is providing the design work and expertise. This has enabled the submission of applications for critical grants from two programs administered by the State of Michigan. The high level of matching funds provided by the campaign has greatly improved the probability of receiving this State funding. The applications are now reaching the final stages of review by both programs and everyone is becoming optimistic about the outcome. When the additional funding is secured from the State, the first segment of the Lowell Area Trailway will be built within a year. This first segment will be modest, only about 2 miles long, but it will be a beginning. Over time, additional segments will be built connecting more points of interest in the community and providing safe avenues to exercise and walk to school and stores. The Lowell Area Trailway will be the local hub that bicyclists from around the region will use to explore Lowell when they arrive from the various planned regional trails. The Lowell Area Trailway will be a permanent monument to inter-community cooperation, volunteerism and generosity that will continue to benefit the people for generations to come.



PLANNING COMMISSION NEWS



The Planning Commission has spent most of the year amending the zoning ordinance to update and add new language. The residential lighting ordinance was amended to clarify wording with definitions and permitted types of lights. A handout is provided with building permit applications. New construction and replacement of old lights must be compliant with the ordinance. A new section was added to allow an accessory building to be constructed on a vacant parcel adjacent to a dwelling parcel of same ownership if the parcels cannot be combined (such as site condo or plat). A small storage shed requires a staff review and a larger building would require a special exception use permit. Adding to the private road ordinance, the Planning Commission included cross section drawings and more detail on clarifications, maintenance agreements, road specifications and regulations. Proposed and adopted amendments and public hearing notices are published on the township website for viewing (www.vergennestwp.org).

Zoning Ordinance Reminders

Junk, Trash, Unlicensed vehicles:

Please note that the Township has a junk, trash and junk vehicle ordinance. Vehicles must have a current license and be in an intact running condition unless they are within a fully enclosed building. See zoning ordinance section 201.407 for details or call the zoning administrator for assistance.

Burning:

A burn permit is required to burn brush or other

combustibles. Call Fire Chief Frank Martin at 897-8135 (his work number) to obtain a permit. See zoning ordinance section 201.428 for regulations or call the zoning administrator for assistance.

Home Businesses:

Home business are permitted in Vergennes, but do require a permit from the Township. There are zoning permit application forms available on the township website under "Forms and Applications." The various types consist of a home occupation within a dwelling, a home occupation within an accessory building, a home based business where most of the activity is done elsewhere and rental storage in old barns. See zoning ordinance sections 201.430, 201.431, 201.431A and 201.431B or call the zoning administrator for assistance.

Flat River Properties:

Just a reminder that as a state-designated Natural River, the Flat River Ordinance requires that the first 25 feet of the land from the river's edge is to be maintained as a natural vegetation strip. This area must remain in a natural condition, but allows for a maximum 4 foot path allowed for river access. Only dead, diseased, dying trees or noxious plants may be removed. Anything else requires zoning administrator approval. Docks, stairs or boardwalks require a permit before any construction, and certain conditions must be met. No buildings may be placed within 100 feet of the rivers edge. See section 201.307 for more details or call the zoning administrator for assistance



WHO IS DRIVING THE DECISIONS ON LOCAL ROAD PROJECTS AND MAINTENANCE?



As you're out for a drive on a lovely day in Vergennes, you may have experienced a rough patch of road or questioned why the speed limit is the rate it is for that particular stretch of road. Although the road may be located within a township, did you know that the township does not have authority over that road?

Most residents do not realize that local roads, including construction and maintenance of these roads, are under the jurisdiction of the county where the road is located. Unlike cities, townships have little road authority, and they receive no transportation funding (Public Act 51 of 1951). However, over 95% of townships in Michigan do contribute money to their local road commission, and in the current economic climate it has become even more common.

In Kent County, the Road Commission requires a 50% match for local road repair. Last summer's repair and reconstruction to Alden Nash from Bailey to Lally came with a \$200,000.00 commitment from Vergennes Township, which will come from our General Fund to be paid out over the next several years.

Although the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009 has provided significant funding for roads, that money is primarily being spent on federal highways and roads under state jurisdiction, rather than local roads. Meanwhile, transportation funding at the state level has not increased, and there has been a sharp decrease in state shared revenue to local units of government. The result? Local roads are being shortchanged.

The funding of roads at the local level is likely to be an ongoing issue for Michigan for some time to come. It is important for residents to be aware of the township's limited role in road projects and maintenance. Issues related to local roads are best addressed by the county road commission, which has the both the authority and responsibility to handle these matters.

For more information, contact the Kent County Road Commission at 242-6900.