Outdoor Ed. in Harpswell’s Schools

By Kara Douglas

When three students at Harpswell Central School (HCS) were asked to predict what percentage of their 4th and 5th grade peers enjoy spending time outdoors in winter they guessed 30%. The reason they offered for their low estimate were “more interest in digital things and video games.”

It’s possible,” says Micah Depper, science teacher at nearby Harpswell Coastal Academy (HCA), “that we live in an era in which we face the greatest opportunity to avoid contact with the natural world.”

Depper, who is teaching students in grades 6 and 9 this year, bases his science curriculum on time spent outdoors.

Outdoor education is nothing new, though it’s gained attention in recent decades, in some cases as an antidote to busy, scheduled lives and in others as a way of implementing hard science. Some schools, public and private, including specialized programs like Outward Bound and The Chewonki Foundation, center their educational values around putting students in contact with nature. Others make efforts to weave it into a curriculum when and where they can.

Finding their way Students from Harpswell Coastal Academy tackle orienteering at Harpswell Heritage Land Trust’s Curtis Farm Preserve. (JALC/KELLOG PHOTO)

The students at HCS, fourth graders Lucy Nelson and Anya Bachor and fifth grader Henry Armstrong, happened to be wrong in their 30% prediction. See OUTDOORS p. 20

Community Radio Closer to Airwaves

By Ed Levine

The Harpswell Radio Project Inc., a not-for-profit group incorporated last fall, recently received a construction permit from the Federal Communications Commission to build a low power FM (LPFM) broadcast station with projected coverage of the entire town and eventually streaming on the Internet.

Now the group has to expand, raise money and begin planning the actual construction.

Under the FCC permit, the group has 18 months to build the station and get it on the air; but can apply for an 18-month extension if needed, said John Halpin, organizer of the project and president of the Harpswell Radio Project.

Halpin, of Long Point, worked as a project manager for building a low power FM station in Bisbee, Arizona, a decade ago and has long been eager to launch a similar project in Harpswell. LPFM stations are available to noncommercial educational entities and public safety and transportation organizations, but not to individuals or for commercial operations.

When the FCC planned to open applications for stations last See RADIO p. 23

MSAD 75 School Budget Increase Hits District

By Tom Allen

Property taxpayers should expect to see larger bills this year due to an increase in the school district budget. And this may be a trend they’ll have to get used to, as the district has recently been granted permission to replace or renovate Mount Ararat High School.

After several years of virtually flat budgets, MSAD 75’s school board has proposed an increase of 4.4% for the 2015 school year. In addition, the budget discontinues use of the district’s fund balance. In all, there will be 93.6% or $1.8 million increase in the local contribution.

For Harpswell this means an increase of approximately $705,741, (All figures depend on the state subsidy, which may decrease this year). According to Superintendent Bradley Smith, this bigger budget will fund new programs or positions, but will help stem the steady cuts of the last few years.

“There is very little in the way of new initiatives in the proposed budget,” Smith says, “What is important is the ability to maintain staff and current programs with less reductions.

Recent years’ cuts to programs and staff reflect the district’s declining enrollment, which has dropped by almost 300 students since 2008 and is projected to drop another 250 by 2018. Despite these cuts, the budget stayed nearly the same as costs such as retirement fund and money redirected to charter schools increased. Use of the fund balance—dollars carried over from previous years—helped to mask the increases.

No more. The fund balance is no longer available, as more of it is used during the school year. After years of hearing voices from local government that the district not increase taxes, it appears that the school board feels it has to do the same.

“We did reduce staff and programs for many years, and in the past two years, have seen that impact across the district. As we listen to parents, we have heard repeatedly the desire to avoid further reductions, and a strong voice that the quality of education in MSAD 75 should not be compromised. The 2015 proposed budget reflects such a commitment,” says Smith.

Harpswell Selectman Elle Multer (whose comments are her own and not the opinion of the Board of Selectmen) supports the MSAD 75 budget, noting that while the school board has faced annual cuts to funding and increases in costs, they couldn’t continue to simply trim the budget without causing real damage to the quality of education.

“I feel they’ve done all the cutting they can do without cutting into the meat of the education program. I’m convinced that to do any more will do real harm,” says Multer.

However, Multer is critical of how the board chose to use the fund balance. Using close to a million dollars in budget surplus last year, she says, made the increase larger this year.

“Nobody looked over the hill See BUDGET p. 22
Radio

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fall, Halpin formed Harpswell Radio Project (HRP) and began preparing an application with his wife, Betsy Saunders, and Peter Russell, a consultant from Orr’s Island and Florida.

According to the application, the purpose of the station “is to contribute to the year-round vitality and sustainability of a small coastal town by building community through communication. The proposed station would present local news and history programming, arts and humanities programming including local events, and programming produced by partnering with other local organizations and institutions, such as the historical society, local schools, and the local working (fishing, farming, etc.) community.”

In January, the group received FCC approval to construct a station to transmit on 97.3 FM. In April, it successfully reserved call letters WHJW from the FCC.

Halpin said the next task is to recruit more volunteers to serve on the group’s board of directors, which currently consists of himself as president, Glen Vose of Cundy’s Harbor as vice president, and Saunders as secretary/treasurer. Halpin said the group will need to find money and then begin planning for the construction, along with developing programming and specific goals to meet community needs.

So far, HRP is a nonprofit, but has set tax-exempt status. Halpin said money will need to be raised to pay for the charitable corporation application, as well as the construction of the station, rental of antenna tower space, licensing of music and ongoing operation.

HRP is planning a series of community meetings to discuss the project and recruit volunteers. They will be held at 5 pm on Tuesday, May 13, at the Cundy’s Harbor Library; 6:30 pm on Wednesday, May 28, at the Harpswell Heritage Land Trust on Harpswell Neck Road; and 1 pm on Saturday, June 14, at the old Orr’s Island Schoolhouse on Route 24.

Anyone interested in more information can contact HRP at harpswellradio@gmail.com.

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