



Shop local

Consumers sharing the spirit of the season tell us what gifts they found in local businesses. Page 2A.



On balance

The MUHS gymnastics team scored points against powerhouse Essex on Saturday. See Page 1B.



Success in six

It only took six days for Monkton kids to gather 1,300 items for their food drive. See Page 10A.

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75¢

George takes pass on re-election bid

Middlebury board chair caps 20 years

By JOHN FLOWERS

MIDDLEBURY — Middlebury selectboard Chairman Dean George has decided to take a pass on re-election after 20 years of service, a decision that creates an open seat for prospective candidates that are already beginning to step forward.

Former Selectman Victor Nuovo has confirmed he will toss his hat into the ring for one of the three selectboard seats that will be up for grabs on March 1. Along with George's post, seats held by incumbent Selectmen Gary Baker and Nick Artim will also be in play. Baker and Artim have confirmed that they will be seeking re-election.

East Middlebury resident Rich-

ard Terk has also taken out a nomination petition for a spot on the board. Terk is leader of the Middlebury Airport Neighborhood Association, a citizens' group that has been opposing expansion at the local airport.

Candidates for town and school offices have until Jan. 25 to submit their nomination petitions to their local town clerks. In Middlebury, those petitions must bear the signatures of at least 30 registered voters of the town. The 2016 local elections will offer an extra wrinkle this year for towns that are part of a supervisory union seeking to consolidate into a single school district under Act 46. Towns in such (See Dean George, Page 7A)

A walk in the woods yields more than a perfect Christmas tree

Editor's note: Reporter Gaen Murphree covers the agriculture beat for this newspaper. In this monthly column she looks at Addison County farm and forest products up close and personal.

RIPTON — This year, given the dismal rain and unseasonably warm weather, we needed a different sort of adventure for getting our family Christmas tree, so we plunked down \$5 at the National Forest ranger station in Middlebury and headed into the hills.

The U.S. Forest Service's Christmas tree program has been around for decades, according to Forest Service Public Affairs Officer Ethan Ready. This year, the governor's own tree was a 32-foot-tall balsam fir harvested in a section of the national forest near Hancock (there's a 20-foot limit for the rest of us). And trees from the Green Mountain Forest have supplied the U.S. Capitol as recently as 2007.

"We have a lot of repeat customers, people whose parents used to bring them and now they're parents

and so they're bringing the kids," said Ready. "It's really the experience — that old time Vermont tradition of getting out in search of that perfect Christmas tree. I think a lot of people enjoy the tradition of packing the kids in the car, grabbing a bow saw and a sled, and in a typical year trudging through the snow and getting out in the elements in search of that perfect tree."

Ready and his own son have been hiking into the forest to find their tree for the past several years.

"This year, we picked the date and we had our permit and we went to our spot and spent a good hour and a half out in the woods," said Ready. "We got some exercise, checked out the beaver pond, checked out this cool root on a tree that had toppled over, saw some birds, got our feet cold and wet — all the experiences you're looking for."

True aficionados, Ready and son, Abraham, 7, hiked around and picked out a likely tree in a likely spot last summer.

(See Christmas tree, Page 13A)



Local Harvest
by Gaen Murphree



MEIGAN, LEFT, CHLOE and Gregor Clark spot a great Christmas tree — an eight-foot-plus eastern hemlock — that they harvested in the Green Mountain National Forest after purchasing a \$5 permit.

Independent photo/Gaen Murphree

No silent night



CATHY WALSH, LEFT, Tamar Begley and Susan Veguez hold onto a menagerie of animals that the trio have been preparing for appearances in the St. Stephen's Church Christmas pageant on Christmas Eve.

Independent photos/Trent Campbell

Live animals bring Christmas story to life

Parishioners and friends carry on a 30-year tradition

By GAEN MURPHREE

MIDDLEBURY — On Christmas Eve a Middlebury church will host its most unusual parishioners of the year, as Smarty, Jackson, Sven, William Tell and Lulu take their place in St. Stephen's eagerly awaited Christmas pageant.

No, they are not children, although the worship hall on the town green will be full of bursting with young people playing parts in the story of the first Christmas — shepherds, sheep, angels, Mary, Joseph, cows, a tiger, mice, a kangaroo and even a bunny or two.

These are four-legged actors playing key parts in the Christmas story.

Smarty, a shaggy "barrel on legs" of a miniature horse, performs as the donkey that carried Mary and Joseph to Bethlehem. Jackson, a curious and

reporter's notebook-nibbling Nigerian pygmy goat, will appear as himself. Of course. Alpacas Sven and William Tell — appropriately regal in brown and cream — will be portraying the camels of the Three Wise Men. And Luna, a very determined Corgi and self-appointed "barn manager," will make her

debut in a sheep costume. Expect her to bark and herd everyone and everything in sight. That dog means business!

Having live animals at the Christmas pageant has been a tradition at the Episcopal church since the 1980s, said parishioner Cathy Walsh, who's been a part of the live

animal tradition for decades.

"Through the eyes of a child, to see the Christmas story enacted with real live animals, makes it so immediate. They're just so honest and real," said Walsh.

The New Haven resident brought her own animals to the pageant for many years and more recently has taken on the job of coordinating the animal end of the Christmas pageant. This year's menagerie of star performers is owned by Tamar Begley, who's been bringing denizens from her well-stocked barn in Weybridge to the St. Stephen's Christmas pageant for the past six or seven years. Come Christmas Eve, Begley and Walsh will be wrangling animals, with help from Susan Veguez of Cornwall, Molly Withers of Ripton, Anabel Hernandez of Bridport, Gail Zuck of New Haven, and Walsh's daughter Emily.

At around 2:30 p.m. on the 24th, the team will load the animals into a livestock trailer, (See Pageant, Page 16A)



SMARTY, A MINIATURE horse owned by Tamar Begley of Weybridge, will have a featured role as a donkey in the St. Stephen's Church annual Christmas pageant on Dec. 24 at 4 p.m.

New idea pitched to cut city truck traffic

By ANDY KIRKALDY

VERGENNES — About one truck drives down Vergennes' Main Street every minute, rolling past historic buildings, cars parked on both sides and considerable pedestrian traffic.

Now, a long-abandoned proposal for a bypass around downtown that would reduce the number of long-haul trucks driving through Vergennes has come back to life, but in a different and potentially much cheaper form. It would continue to allow one-way truck traffic southbound through the city, but send northbound trucks coming up Route 22A on a detour east on Route 17 from Addison to New Haven Junction to reach Route 7, where they would continue north.

Mayor Bill Benton has forwarded to the Agency of Transportation that plan based on an idea pitched by an

executive of the firm Toole Design, which is helping the city come up with a Vergennes Downtown-Basin Master Plan.

"It's an alternative that I think is a moderate alternative. It doesn't have to be expensive."

— Mayor Bill Benton

retary Chris Cole, and received this response:

"Thank you for the proposal. I've forwarded this request to Rich Tetreault, Deputy Secretary of VTrans, who will assemble a multidisciplinary team to evaluate the feasibility of the Mayor's proposal. We will get back to you once that feasibility evaluation is completed."

Van Wyck said he was not ready to endorse the plan, given that other towns have yet to be involved in the process, but believed an idea that could relieve the city's truck-a-minute burden deserved study.

"I took that (response) as positive, beyond that I won't speculate on the possibility of its approval. I'll ask some more questions in Montpelier in January," Van Wyck wrote in an email. "Obviously the towns of Addison, Waltham, New Haven and Ferrisburgh need to weigh in also. I have not specifically endorsed the final outcome yet, since I'm interested in further local input also, though I support the evaluation as a first step."

Benton said he hopes the idea will merit serious consideration, even if it only removes half of the truck traffic from downtown Vergennes.

"It's an alternative that I think is a moderate alternative. It doesn't have to be expensive," Benton said.

The central advantage that this (See Vergennes, Page 14A)



By the way

Otter Creek Audubon will offer a "First Day Bird Walk" event on Jan. 1, beginning at 9 a.m., at Button Bay State Park in Ferrisburgh. (See By the way, Page 16A)

Index

Obituaries.....	6A
Classifieds.....	4B-7B
Service Directory.....	5B-6B
Entertainment.....	10A
Community Calendar.....	8A-9A
Sports.....	1B-3B



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CATHY WALSH, LEFT, and Susan Veguez check in with some of the animals they are helping coordinate and groom for the Christmas pageant at St. Stephen's Church in Middlebury on Christmas Eve.
Independent photo/Trent Campbell



LUNA PATROLS THE Weybridge barn that houses many of the animals that will be used for the St. Stephen's Church Christmas pageant Thursday. Luna will be dressed as a sheep for the pageant.
Independent photo/Trent Campbell



JACKSON THE GOAT explores his Weybridge barn Monday evening as he gets ready for his part in the annual St. Stephen's Church Christmas pageant.
Independent photo/Trent Campbell

Pageant

(Continued from Page 1A)

Walsh and Begley find young drive to Middlebury, park at the shepherds who want to walk in with Marble Works and then herd their performers across Main Street.

Heads usually turn, said Walsh and Begley, as people on the street stop to pet the animals and ask why they're coming to town. One year a passerby fell so in love with the animals that she followed them inside and stayed for the whole pageant.

As each animal waits outside the church for his or her cue, the wranglers stand patiently with them in rain, snow, sleet or hail.

"Through the eyes of a child, to see the Christmas story enacted with real live animals, makes it so immediate. They're just so honest and real."

— Cathy Walsh

Jackson and Luna, the goat and dog. The wranglers help Mary get up on Smarty. And Begley leads the newly minted "donkey" into the sanctuary as Joseph walks beside. Finally, the Wise Men will follow that star, leading their camel-pacas.

A LONG HISTORY

While St. Stephen's has been bringing local animals to church on Christmas Eve for at least 30 years, the tradition itself is far older.

St. Francis of Assisi is credited with staging the first live Nativity in 1223, in the little town of Greccio, Italy. Francis was visiting the town to celebrate a midnight Mass on Christmas Eve and needed a larger venue, so he set up shop outside in the town square. Like Walsh and like many of Vermont's animal lovers, Francis knew that live animals would give him a direct line to people's hearts and bring the Christmas story to life. As related by his biographer Giovanni di Fidanza (also known as St. Bonaventure), Francis "prepared a manger, and brought hay, and an ox and an ass to the place appointed" to celebrate the Babe of Bethlehem.

Francis's idea proved to be a big hit and started, many believe, the whole tradition of Nativity pageants, live Nativity scenes, and Nativity sets large and small, from the exquisitely crafted Baroque mega-villages found in museums across Europe to the cheap set you can still buy at Kmart to the hotly contested life-size municipal manger scenes being picketed and protested across America.

Bonaventure reports that, standing at the manger, Francis and his hearers were transported that Christmas Eve.

St. Stephen's goes one better on St. Francis's ox, ass and manger full of hay by traditionally including a live infant. This reporter distinctly remembers watching the pink-slippered feet of her now 12-year-old, kicking out from underneath Baby Jesus's swaddling clothes.

St. Stephen's will likely be packed, as always, to hear the Christmas story and watch the kids and animals.

Walsh and her crew of wranglers will be prepared:



MINIATURE HORSE SMARTY checks in with a full-size friend it lives with in Weybridge Monday night.
Independent photo/Trent Campbell



ALPACAS SVEN, LEFT, and William Tell will play camels in the St. Stephen's Church Christmas pageant.
Independent photo/Trent Campbell

"We always come with a stable fork and a muck bucket."

Editor's note: Reporter Gaen Murphree is a parishioner at St. Stephen's Episcopal Church.



SUSAN VEGUEZ GUIDES alpacas William Tell and Sven through the barn they share with other animals that will be in a Christmas pageant in Middlebury on Christmas Eve.

By the way

(Continued from Page 1A)

risburgh. New Year's Day birding trips are a tradition held by many in the birding community as they begin to fill their annual bird lists. Participants will walk the trails in search of overwintering birds.

Two Addison County kids are among the 20 auditioned members of the 2015/2016 Young Tradition Touring Group. The musicians, who range from age 12 to 20 and include members from Vermont, Maine, Massachusetts and Quebec, stage high-caliber performances of traditional music and dance. Ben and Romy Munkres of Cornwall will be among the Young Traditions musicians presenting a concert next Monday, Dec. 28, at 7 p.m. at the Lake Champlain Waldorf School in Shelburne.

Temps have been unusually warm and there's no snow yet,

but that doesn't mean there's no speedskating. Middlebury's Lacey Greenamyre has been racing in Saratoga Springs, N.Y., and in Quebec. At the Saratoga Winter Club Meet last month the ninth-grader placed 6th overall and 2nd among the 18-and-under girls; and this month she was second overall in a club meet. At the Quebec Coupe No. 1 in Ste Foy, Quebec, she placed 7th in the long track speedskating competition. Lacey was supposed to skate and her dad do the starting at the Charles Jewtraw All Around Championship in Lake Placid this past weekend, but the Olympic Speed Skating Oval remains closed and the event had to be canceled.

Bread Loaf of Middlebury has completed a major renovation project for The Automaster BMW showroom on Shelburne Road in Shelburne. Deconstruction began

a little more than a year ago, and the total renovation included stripping the existing building down to the structural steel and rebuilding a completely updated showroom, adding 980 square feet of new showroom space to the existing footprint. Construction of the new state-of-the-art facility was completed in June. A ribbon-cutting ceremony for the project was held recently.

If you're a reader, it may be time to pick up "The Parrot Trainer" by Swain Wolfe. That will be the focus of discussion at a meeting of the Bridport Book Club on Wednesday, Jan. 13. As usual, the meeting will be held at 7 p.m. at the Bridport Highway Department conference room, at the corner of Crown Point Road and Short Street. All interested readers are welcome! Call 758-2858 for more information.

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