

# 2025 TOP TEN

The biggest  
stories of  
2025

as chosen by  
the news staff at the  
*Addison Independent*

Thursday,  
January 1, 2026

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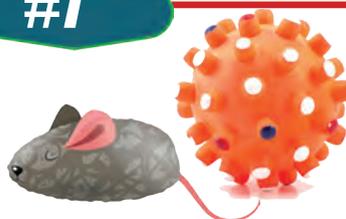
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# Trump Administration actions felt in Addison County

## TOP STORY OF THE YEAR



Residents of the United States have long drawn the spotlight with the national press corps following them around reporting on their policy proposals and the give and take of the political process. But, while their moves to shape and enforce laws starts at the national level, we in the local media covering the everyday lives of ordinary people in this small corner of this brave little state traditionally are touched by the nation's chief executive only occasionally.

Not anymore. We shied away from picking something national for this local publication's No. 1 story of 2025. But the pervasiveness of President Trump's policy changes over the first 11 months back in office and the way that his oval office dictates have quickly and onerously affected Addison County, meant that we could see no other single story that was more important to our neighbors, as it is to the country as a whole.

Trump, his policies and how they are hitting home here made it on the front page of *Independent* at least half of the editions in 2025. They made it into the opinion section more often.

While there were protests around his Jan. 20 inauguration that weren't so far out of the ordinary, the real local impact started almost immediately. At the beginning of February, Middlebury College science departments found themselves scrambling when Trump threw a huge monkey wrench into the process of scientific discovery — a process that has led to generations of life-saving advancements that are the envy of the world. The next month, local businesses were trying to get their minds around the president's unilateral imposition of tariffs. Also in March, local schools were told they would lose federal funds for local foods — a double whammy that hurt kids and farms. In April, Trump attacked funding for libraries and museums. Plus, Middlebury College, already reeling from science funding cuts, also found itself countering Trump's effort to make life difficult for international students to

live and study here.

Federal support for local disaster preparedness also took a hit.

In the crosshairs during May were AmeriCorps job programs that provide educated workers to many Addison County non-profits. By the beginning of June, it was Northlands Job Corps that was told by Trump's minions that it would be closing.

But locals were finding their footing when pushing back against the president's dictatorial edicts. On April 5, hundreds of people gathered in Vergennes, Middlebury and elsewhere in a series of "Hands Off" rallies, that were coordinated across the nation. At the end of April, around 60 community members gathered in Bristol's Holley Hall to brainstorm responses

to his actions. "The goal tonight is to move from discussion to action," one organizer told the crowd.

The first "No Kings Day" rally on Jun 14 brought out an estimated 2,500 protesters in Addison County alone,

But the onslaught of federal takeaways from local folks was not over.

In early July, human services providers were contending with threatened cuts to federal food assistance programs, as well as rental subsidies for low-income Vermonters. If the loss of those funds for poor people wasn't enough, local schools found themselves asking the Trump administration to please send the money that Congress had appropriated to them but federal education officials were not inclined to send.

With food assistance cuts and tariffs causing real pain locally, more people lined Route 7 in Addison County on Oct. 18 for a

second No Kings rally.

Vermont Attorney General Charity Clark stopped in Middlebury to explain the 32 lawsuits she had filed on the state's behalf aiming to get Trump to simply follow the law. At least one of the suits took on Trump for not funding programs, such as food assistance, that was money appropriated by Congress. "Denying SNAP funding for millions of Americans, when Congress created a contingency plan to ensure no American goes hungry is illegal and it is cruel," Clark told the *Independent*.

"The goal tonight is to move from discussion to action."

- Holley Hall Protest Organizer



## Top Ten ways to reduce waste in 2026

- Avoid impulse shopping. Buy only what you need.
- Say no to freebies from events, work, and other gatherings.
- Use reusable containers and bags at stores.
- Repair broken items instead of discarding them.
- Shop secondhand instead of new to extend an item's life.
- Buy items made from recycled content, not raw materials.
- Make your own non-hazardous cleaners.
- Donate usable items instead of throwing them away.
- Before grocery shopping, shop your fridge first.
- Consider online subscriptions and bills; avoid junkmail.

District Transfer Station Hours: Mon-Fri 7 AM - 3 PM & Sat 8 AM - 1 PM  
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# Local school districts merge, close facilities



Addison County's kindergarten-through-12th grade enrollment has been declining for more than two decades, and 2025 was no different. Area residents — like most Vermonters — once again signaled that while they were growing weary of education tax hikes, they weren't keen on seeing their respective local schools closed or consolidated.

The state Legislature and Gov. Phil Scott allocated an additional \$100 million in state aid for education to blunt the property tax impacts of fiscal year 2026 school budgets. But the state also enacted a new law, Act 73, that set out a process for paring the state's school districts from the current 119. It also devised a "weighted" student funding formula, and created a statewide education tax rate.

It's a law that also called for statewide graduation requirements and a statewide calendar, class-size minimums, the potential resumption of state aid for school construction, and revised criteria for independent schools to receive public dollars.

A Vermont School Redistricting Task Force was charged with drafting up to three maps that could catalyze a major shakeup in the way schools are grouped, operated and financed in the state. But the 11-member group, after holding a series of meetings and public input sessions over the summer and early autumn, instead endorsed a proposal that would incentivize voluntary mergers, largely following the state's larger Career and Technical Education districts.

All eyes are now on state lawmakers as they reconvene in Montpelier for a 2026 session that will bring greater scrutiny of Act 73 and how to implement it — if at all.

But 2025 did bring some tangible school reductions and partnerships in Addison County — particularly in the Addison Central School District.

The ACSD board made the painful decision to close Ripton Elementary School, when enrollment forecasts for the fall of 2025 called for fewer than 30 total students. There was no way — barring a massive, unexpected infusion of children — that the incoming Ripton Elementary class could conform to a revised district class-size policy requiring classrooms to have "a minimum of 10 students in not more than two grades."

Most Ripton residents were understandably crestfallen by the closure decision, which would end a two-centuries tradition of local schools in the mountain town. Plans called for Ripton's K-5 students to be bused to the Salisbury Community School, which had the capacity to receive them.

Ripton residents turned their attention to possible repurposing of the Ripton Elementary building, for such uses as town offices, community center or a fitness area. The ACSD board is poised to return the building to Ripton, but first, residents in all seven of the district's towns this coming March will have to approve formal closure of the school.

ACSD this year also voted to blend Shoreham's K-5 students into Bridport Central School beginning next fall,

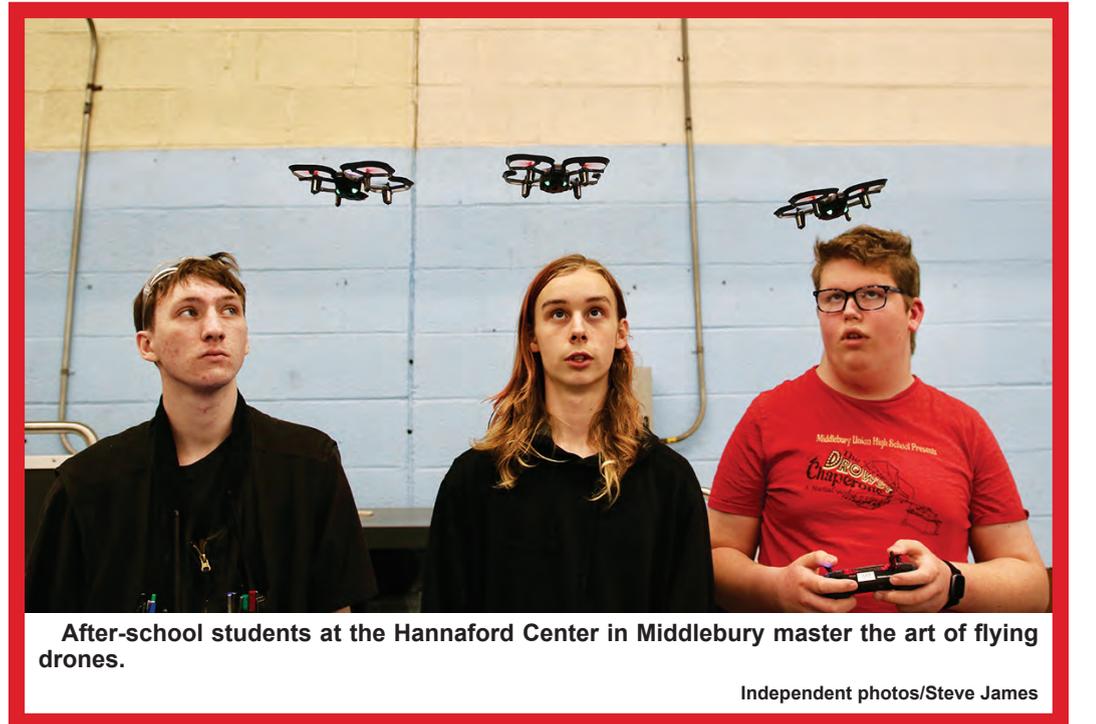
and at the same time convert Shoreham Elementary School into a district PreK hub. District officials OK'd the move based on declining enrollment at both schools and lagging standardized test scores among K-5 students in both communities. Having the combined student body at Bridport will allow all students to learn in single-grade classrooms; without the merger, both schools would have had, for the first time, all multi-grade classrooms.

The announced conversion of Shoreham Elementary into a PreK center didn't sit well with some Shoreham residents, who — like their Ripton counterparts — faced the loss of a community gathering spot and historical touchstone.

Meanwhile, in the Rutland Northeast Supervisory Union, officials are moving toward consolidating more elementary-age students into Neshobe Elementary School in Brandon. That would mean that kids in K-5 at Leicester Central School would be bused to Neshobe, the Leicester school would become home to the district's PreK program now in the Whiting School building, and Whiting would be closed. That decision is not yet final.



The ACSD board made the painful decision to close Ripton Elementary School, when enrollment forecasts for the fall of 2025 called for fewer than 30 total students.



After-school students at the Hannaford Center in Middlebury master the art of flying drones.

Independent photos/Steve James

# Extreme weather strikes hard locally, statewide



After two years marked by destructive flooding, the summer of 2025 brought a different kind of beast — severe drought. This past August was the driest in at least 130 years, and those dry conditions created challenges for local farmers and other members of the Addison County community.

Middlebury residents in August were asked to conserve water after a long stretch without significant rain, and Bristol Fire Chief Brett LaRose posted a “no-burn” advisory as a result of heat and dry conditions. Later that month, state officials asked Vermont residents to take steps to prevent human-caused fires.

By September, the U.S. Drought Monitor had classified nearly 96% of Addison County as in “severe drought” and those conditions were taking a toll on farmers around the region. Morgen Brown, a dairy nutritionist for Poulin Grain, pointed to a common challenge among small and larger-scale operations — a shortage of feed and feed quality.

The following month, local farmers gathered at Orwell’s Lazy Dog Farm to talk with U.S. Sen. Peter Welch about those and other impacts they’d seen from the drought. Lazy Dog Farm owners Jesse and Stefanie Wilbur noted that dry conditions had left them with about half as much feed as they’d usually produce for their herd of dairy cows. As a result, Jesse said the farm had spent around \$50,000 on supplemental feed.

Other farmers shared similar experiences and pointed to other

impacts, such as having to haul loads of water from a nearby creek each day for their animals.

County farmers joined other producers around the state in reporting an estimated \$17,387,289 in total losses across Vermont resulting from the drought. That number was tallied through an Agriculture Drought Impact Survey conducted by the Vermont Agency of Agriculture, Food & Markets that closed in December. Farmers in Addison County reported an estimated \$1.4 million in losses, the highest total from any county.

Loren Wood of Woodnotch Farms in Shoreham said the drought was the worst he’d seen, a sentiment echoed by 58% of the producers who responded to the survey.

Unfortunately, the drought wasn’t the only extreme weather event Addison County residents dealt with this year. Parts of the county sustained damage from severe thunderstorms that brought heavy rains, hail and flash flooding to the region on July 10 — the anniversary of the deluges that hit the state in 2024 and 2023.

This time around the storms brought down trees and powerlines, led to lightning strikes on two homes, and peeled back a 4,000-square-foot section of the Middlebury Union High School roof. Such extreme weather events are becoming more frequent due to climate change, and municipalities around the county have worked to address the damage caused by those events and prepare for future ones. However, they face some challenges

in those efforts, such as the costs of making repairs and preparations and navigating shifts between different weather conditions.

Around the same time that the July 10 storm hit Addison County, state and local officials expressed concern over how staff and funding cuts at the Federal Emergency Management Agency could affect Vermonters’ ability to respond to and recover from disasters. Michael Leyden, Bristol’s Emergency Management Director, noted Vermont has a history of using a decent amount of federal funds related to disaster preparedness, response and recovery.

“Every change that comes down in that lane of funding, potentially has an oversized impact on a place like Vermont,” he said.

By September, the U.S. Drought Monitor had classified nearly 96% of Addison County as in “severe drought.”



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# Housing shortage remains, but some progress made

# 4

The tight housing market continued to lock out many families seeking to settle in Addison County in 2025. But there were some glimmers of hope and a growing resolve in individual communities to build more workforce and affordable housing.

retaining working-age people, while adding 36,000 primary homes during the next five years to boost Vermont's non-seasonal housing stock to 350,000 by the year 2035.

Some communities in our area began tweaking their zoning rules to boost housing startups within their borders — particularly in, or close to, town centers. Bridport took this assignment very seriously. It partnered with the Vermont Council on Rural Development on a program titled “Bridport Comes Together,” through which townspeople identified the need for more housing as a top local priority. This led to creation of a Bridport Housing Task Force that spent several months collecting more public feedback and expertise from organizations like the Addison County Regional Planning Commission to help inform the Bridport selectboard on ways to promote more housing development.

After many months of planning, permitting and financing, the new Stonecrop Meadows neighborhood off Middlebury's Seminary Street Extension began to go vertical in a big way last spring. Phase one involved installation of 45 homes built in three segments thanks to modular structures constructed off-site by Huntington Homes in East Montpelier.

Plans call for Stonecrop to grow to more than 200 units by the time it's fully built out, within the next two to three years.

It was a year of rejoicing for seniors looking for right-sized accommodations with services in northern Addison County. Seven years after Dan and Rebecca Hassan had first thought of expanding the 38-bed Vergennes Residential Care elderly living home in the city's downtown into the 88-bed Vergennes Grand Senior Living complex, the first residents moved into the new facility on March 20.

The Middlebury Development Review Board in December approved a 35-unit, four-story apartment building — that will also host a restaurant — on a 0.71-acre lot near the intersection of Middle Road and Route 7. Barring any appeals, the developer — Pennsylvania attorney Phil Rosenzweig —

plans to take the building to construction this fall, with an estimated 15-month timeline for completion.

About the same time, Vergennes got some million-dollar news on the housing front.

A big grant and a property transfer moves forward the effort to develop 74 units of workforce housing on a 14.4-acre parcel off North Main Street that mostly lies behind the Vergennes police station. The project is called “Vergennes North.” First, the Northern Borders Regional Commission announced that its \$37.2 million of federally funded grants to communities in northern Vermont, Maine, New Hampshire and New York included \$1 million to Vergennes to put toward the cost of building a road and related infrastructure for that project. Then, Peter Kahn, a principal in Vergennes Housing Partners LLC, which is proposing to build those 74 units, told the *Independent* the partnership had that day completed the purchase of the 14.4-acre property. He was happy to talk about the \$1 million grant for a project he has described in the past as creating “74 units of housing affordable to people of middle income, in multi-family dwellings, duplex and single-family homes.”

Essentially, Kahn said, the new funding can be put toward Vergennes North's complete “road and related infrastructure” needs. The grant specifies “a city road.”

“We had applied for it a year ago and didn't get it, so this was a really pleasant surprise this came through. It's great,” Kahn said. “We are delighted.”

The grant will go to and be managed by the city of Vergennes. City Manager Ron Redmond credited Addison County Economic Development Corporation Executive Director Alex Armani-Munn for working with Vergennes Housing Partners on the successful application.

And the city was exploring the possibility of creating a project-based Tax Increment Financing District. The central idea behind Tax Increment Financing, or TIF, is that a municipality can bond to provide infrastructure that allows the private sector to create more valuable real estate. Then, higher property-tax revenue generated from the improved property not only pays back the bond, but also leaves the municipality with property assessed at a higher rate than previously, thus generating more tax revenue. TIFs have been profitable for at least a half-dozen Vermont communities.



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# Leadership positions see turnover

It's typical to see some turnover in leadership positions around the county each year, and this year saw several familiar faces step down from the positions they'd long held to make way for new leaders.

As the year kicked off, longtime selectboard members in two towns announced they would not seek re-election. In Middlebury, Heather Seeley said she would step down after nine years in office, and over in Monkton three spots on the five-member selectboard were set to open up after former Selectboard Chair Stephen Pilcher, John McNerney and Marikate Kelley said they'd be vacating their seats.

Also in January, Middlebury College tapped Ian Baucom to lead the institution as its 18th president. Baucom stepped into the role in July and was officially installed to the post in November, succeeding former

president Laurie Patton, whose tenure ended at the close of 2024.

The Addison County Economic Development Corporation announced in February that Alexander Armani-Munn would serve as the organization's next executive director, stepping into the shoes of Fred Kenney who had served in the role for seven years.

Town Meeting Day in March saw several new faces elected to serve on school boards and selectboards around the county, with the Addison Central School District Board and Monkton selectboard both welcoming multiple new members.

The Middlebury Area Land Trust in May announced that Kevin Fox would take the reins as its new executive director in July, bringing over 25 years of leadership in conservation and sustainable development to the role.

Former State Rep. Mari Cordes, D-Bristol, resigned from her post in

June, citing both challenges to secure enough shifts as a Registered Nurse at the University of Vermont Medical Center and an increasing number of verbal personal attacks from individuals opposed to her political views. Democratic leaders in Bristol, Lincoln, Monkton and Starksboro supplied Gov. Phil Scott with a few names to consider as he prepared to appoint someone to serve the remainder of Cordes's two-year term. After many months, the governor ultimately selected Lincoln Democrat Karen Lueders to serve the final year of the term.

In Bristol, town officials chose Gregory W. Faust as the municipality's next town

(See Leadership, Page 10)

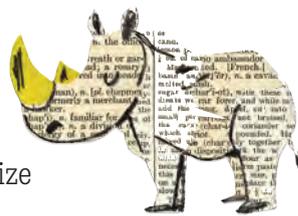
Town Meeting Day in March saw several new faces elected to serve on school boards and selectboards around the county.



## THE ADDISON INDEPENDENT IS CELEBRATING 80 YEARS IN 2026... ... THAT'S MORE THAN 4,100 WEEKS OF LOCAL REPORTING IN ADDISON COUNTY!

### HERE ARE SOME FUN FACTS ABOUT OUR 79TH YEAR:

- ★ Our dedicated team brought 3,206 pages to life in 2025. Bonus fact: If you multiply that number by the number of weekly subscribers and newsdealers, that's over 18.5 million printed pages!
- ★ We printed approximately 380 football fields worth of pages last year (not including special sections)!
- ★ Our small digital team worked on 16 website projects for local businesses last year. Will your website be next in 2026?
- ★ We estimate around 15,000 readers pour through each printed edition and receive more than 13,000 unique visitors each month to our website.
- ★ The June 5th edition, which included our annual Summer Guide, was 126 pages and our heaviest edition of the year, clocking in at .8 pounds per copy for a total of 4,468 pounds of Addy Indy. That's roughly the average size of a white rhino!
- ★ We currently estimate we reach about 45% of residents in Addison County with our local news, but our goal is to increase that number to 75%. Can you help us inspire more people to read the Addy Indy? **Visit [addisonindependent.com/subscribe](http://addisonindependent.com/subscribe)!**
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HOLY COW!

**BONUS FUN FACT:** According to a recent USDA study, there are 1,672 cows per 1,000 people in Addison County.

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# PHOTOS

*Independent* photographer Steve James takes photos all over the county, all year round. He says he doesn't have one favorite photo for 2025, but here are 10 that he took a shine to — and why.



WEYBRIDGE NOVELIST CHRIS Bohjalian enjoys Jesse's approval. James notes he "took at least 20 photos before getting this money shot" of the pup licking Bohjalian's face.



A SOMALI STUDENT snowshoes at Middlebury College's Feb graduation. Incongruous images often command attention, James said, noting while there's no snow in Somalia, "the student embraced the Vermont winter with a broad smile."



VERMONT GOV. PHIL Scott, Sen. Peter Welch and other dignitaries shovel dirt at a housing project in Middlebury. "Ground-breakings can be dull events," James writes, "but these guys couldn't resist my suggestion they aim their dirt at the photographers."



THIS CIRQUE DEL Fuego performer was breathing fire at Middlebury's Town Hall Theater opening of its new wing in 2025. James notes this photo was technically challenging, taking several attempts, "to capture the texture of the flame that wasn't over-exposed."



HOT DAYS OF summer 2025 kicked off mid-June at the Middlebury town pool as captured by this young girl showing how to keep cool for the photographer.

# PHOTOS



**TINA FRIML**, A MUHS graduate, performs her standup routine at a comedy workshop during the Middlebury New Filmmakers Festival in August. James writes: "Tina's expressions are irresistible — the camera loves her!"



**AT THE NO Kings** protest in Middlebury this June, this man dressed in colonial garb and surrounded by flags, James notes, "was a perfect symbol of the displeasure with President Trump felt by many patriotic Americans."



**THIS SWIMMER GETS** a flying start in a backstroke race at a Vergennes Champs meet in July. "Swimming isn't easy to photograph," James writes, "but I went for the backstroke start because it combines energy, grace and power."



**DURING A VISIT** to Vergennes, Sen. Bernie Sanders hosted a hoops clinic. As a photographer, James writes, it's fun to show "a lesser-known side of Vermont's senior senator, an accomplished athlete in high school. And you can't miss with kids!"



**MIDDLEBURY COLLEGE PRESIDENT** Ian Baucom took a turn serving hot chocolate during a cold winter night during Middlebury's Holiday Stroll this December, an example of the close embrace the president has with the community.

# Middlebury College sees big changes

# 6

2025 proved to be a big year for Middlebury College, and not only because the institution celebrated the 225th anniversary of its founding in November. That same fall weekend, the college community gathered for the inauguration of Middlebury College President Ian B. Baucom, who succeeds Interim President Steve Snyder and former

college was expecting a \$14.1 million deficit for the fiscal year. The new steps announced were aimed at helping bring expenses in line with revenues and were expected to achieve more than \$10 million in savings

Faculty, staff and students pushed back against the measures. A “Walkout to Defend Middlebury” in May saw over 200 people gather outside the college’s Old Chapel — home of the president’s office — to protest the compensation cuts and other actions. In remarks to the crowd, members of the college community urged administrators to change course and expressed frustration over college employees taking the brunt of cuts aimed at addressing a financial

dilemma they didn’t cause. The protest followed other efforts from members of the college community to push back against the changes in employee benefits, which also included a petition started by 12 senior members of the Middlebury College Economics Department. The college’s Faculty Council and Middlebury’s chapter of the American Association of University Professors in April cosponsored a Sense of the Faculty Motion demanding college officials reverse the compensation cuts and enrollment increase.

Later in May, college faculty took another step — urging administrators to divest from the institution’s graduate school in in Monterey, Calif. Faculty passed a Sense of the Faculty Motion asking college officials to begin a comprehensive restructuring of the Middlebury Institute of International Studies at Monterey (MIIS) and close the campus within three years. Three months later, Middlebury College officials announced the institution would indeed conclude residential graduate programs and certain online degree programs at MIIS. In a message to the college community, Baucom said those programs and operations would be wrapped up over the next two years. Baucom in the message acknowledged losses the institution has

experienced since it acquired MIIS over a decade ago — losses college students and faculty had pointed to when urging administrators to close the Monterey campus.

Baucom also outlined next steps for the process, which included meetings with MIIS faculty, staff and students.

As the year came to a close, there were other efforts underway to consider the institution’s future. During his inauguration address in November, Baucom noted the college community would launch a new strategic planning process centered around the question, “What is Middlebury for?”



Ian B. Baucom



former President Laurie Patton. Baucom is the college’s 18th president. Baucom had stepped into the role in July and identified several areas of focus for his first months as college president. Those included working with members of the college community to build a stronger financial future for the institution.

College administrators in April had announced multiple steps the institution would take to balance its budget, such as limiting employee benefits, offering a financial incentive for Vermont employees to retire early and growing undergraduate enrollment in the coming years. In the announcement, administrators noted the

## Leadership

(Continued from Page 7)

administrator. Faust began his role in July, succeeding former Bristol town administrator Valerie Capels, who retired from the post in 2024.

A few local libraries welcomed new directors this year. Kate McGowan took the helm of the Lincoln Library in July, and the following month, Catherine Goldsmith took the helm at Russell Memorial Library in Monkton.

Meanwhile, citing mounting professional and family responsibilities — and his conviction that volunteer boards need regular turnover—longtime Middlebury selectboard Chairman Brian Carpenter in November made it

official that he won’t seek reelection in March.

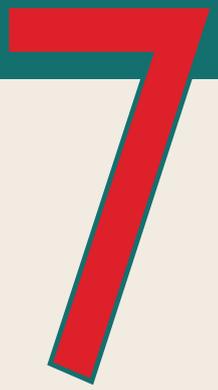
“I’ve always been one to believe that it’s important for organizations to renew and have fresh leadership when they are serving the public good,” Carpenter told the Independent at the Middlebury home of his business, Champlain Valley Equipment.

“The town needs focus, and my focus is going to be elsewhere for a couple of years,” Carpenter added. “It’s getting to the point where there are a few too many tasks.” Among those tasks is dealing with his company’s 2024 acquisition of Empire Tractor Inc.

As the year came to a close, we learned that Ferrisburgh Selectboard Chair Clark Hinsdale he won’t seek reelection this March. Hinsdale told the *Independent* he wanted to get the word out publicly to give prospective candidates ample time to consider running. Petitions for elective office are due at town offices at 5 p.m. on Monday, Jan. 26, and must be signed by at least 25 Ferrisburgh voters.

Fellow longtime Ferrisburgh selectboard member Jim Benoit’s term also expires on Town Meeting Day in March. Benoit confirmed in an email to the *Independent* he intends to seek reelection.

# Addison County buildings get major makeovers



Our human-built landscape is changing as 2025 gave rise to several significant construction projects. Town Hall Theater, Ilsley Public Library and the Vergennes Opera House each upgraded their buildings. THT's renovation wrapped up this past year; construction at Ilsley and the Vergennes Opera House got underway.

## TOWN HALL THEATER

In February 2025, Town Hall Theater raised the curtain on the 1,430-square-foot Doug & Debbie Anderson Rehearsal Studio — the first completed space in its \$8.5 million transformation designed to solidify the theater as a regional hub for visual and performing arts. Over the next several months, the theater unveiled access to other completed spaces in its three-story, 7,000-square-foot Merchants Row addition, officially celebrating its reopening in late June. Festivities included a party with musician Mihali, a ribbon cutting and open house, family-friendly performances and a show by the Rodney Marsalis Brass Band.

Town Hall Theater Executive Director Lisa Mitcell told *the Addison Independent* in June that the expanded space allows for more extensive programming. "We've already tested the limits of having things

going on in every single room and space at the same time ... and it's all working," she said. "The building has this beautiful buzz right now and we're looking forward to more of that."

## ILSLEY PUBLIC LIBRARY

Construction at Middlebury's Ilsley Public Library kicked off in March: the library relocated down the street, operating out of the National Bank of Middlebury's Duclos building, while construction firm ReArch took possession of the library's 75 Main Street site. Local taxpayers are picking up \$4.5 million of the \$17 million price tag through a bond issue, with the balance covered through a very successful fund drive, local option tax reserves and federal rebates.

By late August, the renovation was about 30% complete — but not without a few hurdles. Workers found a concrete structure buried at the front of the library stairs that was time-consuming to remove. They also realized that the building's original 1924 slate roof would need to be replaced. Those repairs were projected to gobble up the majority of a project contingency fund, until two anonymous donors stepped forward with a combined \$105K to apply toward the extra expenses.

Construction at Ilsley continues.

According to a recent email newsletter update from Director Dana Hart, the library's new windows were on tap to be installed in mid-December.

"Plumbing and roof work is progressing steadily," Hart wrote. "Interior framing is well underway, with progress on first-floor walls. Site and concrete work is complete for the season, including stormwater connections and rebuilt front stairs. Painting continues on exposed wood, steel and electrical elements."

The renovation is slated to be completed in summer 2026.

## VERGENNES OPERA HOUSE

The \$2.2 million All Access Project is bringing accessibility upgrades to the Opera House's 1897 building, which also houses Vergennes City Hall.

(See *Makeovers*, Page 12)



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# New childcare slots open in Middlebury, Addison



Accessing affordable childcare isn't easy. There just aren't enough spots, and that's proved a major impediment to Addison County's efforts to attract young families to populate schools and fill jobs. But 2025 brought good news for families. The Otter Creek Child Center in Middlebury completed its major renovation project in November, and now has the capacity to serve

77 additional children. A new childcare center, The Growing Tree, opened in Addison in August, and can serve up to 20 children.

And the growing availability of high-quality childcare programs is the direct result of Vermont's Historic Childcare Law Act 76, which became law in 2023 and continued to make changes in the industry in 2025.

That doesn't mean the childcare crisis is solved. But these additional slots, coupled with the state's income-based

childcare subsidy program, make it a little easier for families to find care for young kids.

## OTTER CREEK CHILD CENTER

In November, the Otter Creek Child Center (OCCC) cut the ceremonial ribbon on its newly completed renovations and a three-story, 12,000-square-foot addition at 150 Weybridge Street in Middlebury. The roughly \$12-million project has allowed OCCC to ramp up staffing and add 77 much-needed childcare slots, for a new total of 139. Plans call for the addition of

two new preschool classrooms during the fall of 2026, if enrollment allows. And that shouldn't be a problem for OCCC, which has 240 kids on its waiting list.

The OCCC expansion project began seven years ago, spurred by the dearth of childcare slots in Addison County. The shortage was hampering the recruitment efforts of several local employers, including Middlebury College. The college would eventually make a \$4 million commitment to the child center expansion, including the donation of a 2.5-acre lot that made the building addition possible. When project costs proved higher than expected, an anonymous Middlebury College donor stepped forward with a \$5 million gift. Former U.S. Sen. Patrick Leahy secured a \$3.1 million earmark for the project, while Vermont Community Recovery & Revitalization (\$500,000), the Northern Borders Regional Commission (\$350,000), Let's Grow Kids (\$200,000), and the Hoehl Family Foundation (\$100,000) also came through with key dollars.

The November ribbon cutting ceremony was visibly moving for OCCC Executive Director Linda January.

"Today represents more than the opening of a building; it is a celebration of what our community can accomplish when we work together with a shared purpose, ensuring that every child has access to a safe, developmentally rich place to learn and grow," she told a crowd of around 100 spectators of all ages. "This project has taken commitment, creativity and collaboration from so many people."

## THE GROWING TREE

On Aug. 4, The Growing Tree opened its doors inside the Addison Community

Center — the former elementary school building on Route 17 near Addison Four Corners. The program, launched by longtime early educator Michelle Bishop, offers full-day, center-based childcare to children ages 32 months to five years. The Growing Tree's programming runs from 7:30 a.m.-4:30 p.m., and the center will operate year-round with some school breaks. The Giving Tree's Facebook page notes that it is a universal Pre-K partner program, which means children can receive specialized services like speech language services via their local school district. The childcare program currently has a team of three individuals, including Bishop, who serves as director.

Bishop has spent the majority of her career working in early education. She most recently worked for Vermont Head Start, first serving in the classroom and later as a home visitor. She wanted to develop a program that would accommodate parents' schedules and that could help meet the needs of families in the Vergennes area. When Bishop heard that the Addison Community Center space was open, she decided to take the leap. She spent 18 months working with town officials on a lease, checking off licensing requirements and securing funding to support the effort. She also worked to install new playground equipment at the site, an effort supported by Middlebury Fence staff.

In August, Bishop told *The Addison Independent* that the program was off to a solid start. And she wants it to grow.

"I would love to consider the idea of opening a toddler room," she said. "It's a thought to have maybe next year; to get settled first and then see what the process is to open a second classroom."



# Makeovers

(Continued from Page 11)

Renovations include a new elevator tower at the end of the alley between the Opera House and St. Paul's Episcopal Church. The elevator will provide access to City Hall and the theater, and the alleyway will be resurfaced to become ADA-compliant. Accessibility improvements are underway inside the Opera House as well. A motorized lift will provide ADA-complaint access from the dressing room to the stage and theater levels. Plans also call for an access ramp from the driveway to the dressing room and an ADA-compliant restroom.

Sweeping federal budget cuts in

late February had the Friends of the Vergennes Opera House, the volunteer group that operates the venue, worried about the status of \$500,000 in federal funding from the National Park Service. But those worries were abated in early March, when the National Park Service confirmed that the money would come through.

Although the theater has been closed while construction is underway, performances haven't stopped. This past fall the Opera House launched its "Off Stage" series, holding performances at other Vergennes-area venues including restaurants, churches, Bixby Library and Vergennes Grand Senior Living. Four more "Off Stage" performances are

scheduled for early next year. The All Access Project is projected to wrap up in March of 2026, and three performances are scheduled for the revamped facility this coming spring.

But some of the big changes to infrastructure will not be so visible as these three big buildings. Middlebury residents on Town Meeting Day voted overwhelmingly in favor of three public works-related bond proposals, the biggest of which was a \$49.5 million upgrade of the town's 24-year-old wastewater treatment plant. If all proceeds according to plan, the sewer plant upgrade project will be completed in 2030 and according to City Manager Ron Redmond the original plan of a vote on Town Meeting Day

of 2025 had been scuttled.

In an email, Redmond reported that recently appointed BGS Commissioner Wanda Minoli and Winters met with the committee on Dec. 3, after which the committee requested more specifics on the buildings' safety measures, staffing protocols and levels, contract details between the state and a potential operator, more details on the nature of the juveniles the facility would serve, and an "assessment of potential changes in community risk levels."

Redmond called the meeting cordial and concluded his email: "The Committee and State will continue their work. There will be a ballot measure at some point in the future."

# The homeless crisis has not gone away, despite a few more homes



The beginning of 2025 saw frigid temperatures and the recent removal of Middlebury's largest encampment behind Ilsley Library temporarily make homelessness more of an unseen problem in the county's shire town.

So where did the folks go?

Sadly, homes seemed as out of reach as ever for folks at the lowest end of the economic spectrum. A federally mandated 2025 Vermont "Point-in-Time Count" of sheltered and unsheltered homeless Vermonters on Jan. 22 revealed 3,386 unhoused Vermonters, including 633 children and 215 Vermonters 65 years old or older.

A subsequent, June 2025 "Coordinated Entry Data," or CED, count done by the state of Vermont identified "at least" 4,588 unhoused Vermonters, including 1,041 children and 269 Vermonters 65 years old or older. That same CED process flagged 117 homeless persons in Addison County, including 84 adults and 33 children. Of the 117 persons, 53 were dealing with mental health issues, three with alcoholism, nine with substance use disorder, 10 with developmental disabilities, 26 with chronic health issues, and 26 living with physical

disabilities, according to the report.

And to make matters worse, both of the county's emergency shelters were consistently full year round, and at a time when the Trump Administration has been pushing for cuts and the repurposing of federal housing subsidies that have historically been earmarked for long-term housing. Also, on July 1 the state ended its pandemic-era program of housing some homeless people in motels.

Homeless advocates said that many people are simply settled into the woods or other less-conspicuous spots, choosing a more solitary existence, away from construction and in deference to a new Middlebury encampment ordinance.

There was some "good" news at mid-year as Charter House Coalition's shelter was full but the waiting list was just four, down from 23 names last year. There was also creation of an Addison County Homeless Outreach Team, which includes representatives of the Charter House, Counseling Service of Addison County, Helping Overcome Poverty's Effects, John Graham Housing & Services, Porter Hospital and the Open Door Clinic. Members of

that group meet weekly with folks living outdoors, checking on their welfare and offering assistance.

But, Vermont's Public Housing Authority is facing an unprecedented crisis due to FY'25 federal budget shortfalls. As a result of these shortfalls, 1,194 households might lose their Section 8 Housing Choice vouchers and 293 vouchers were lost in first half of 2025, according to a new state report.

The homelessness crisis is being exacerbated by Vermont's growing eviction crisis, according to Vermont Legal Aid, a nonprofit law firm that provides civil legal services to Vermonters who are elderly, disabled, discriminated against, or otherwise cannot afford legal help. VLA released a report that showed evictions made up

(See Homeless, Page 14)



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# 10 County, college athletes brought home gold in 2025

**A**DDISON COUNTY — As is often the case, Addison County individual athletes and teams captured a number of championships.

In 2025, the individual list includes two runners, a tennis player, a Nordic skier and multiple wrestlers.

Softball, women's lacrosse, girls' soccer, volleyball and football teams joined the title parade.

The first of the year to claim a crown was Middlebury Union High School senior Jazmyn Hurley, who in January at UVM's indoor track and field facility won the Division II 55- and 300-meter races, adding to an already impressive trophy case. She was not done for

the tournament's outstanding wrestler after defeating higher seeds on the way to his victory.

Coach and Middlebury native Kate Livesay's Middlebury College women's lacrosse team earned the first spring title. The Panthers rallied from four goals down to defeat Tufts in the NCAA D-III final, 10-9. They finished 21-1 and won the program's fourth straight national title.

Next came senior MUHS tennis player Jackson Murray. Murray, the Tigers' No. 1 player since he was a freshman, broke through for his first state title, losing only one set in four tournament matches.

There were some high hopes dashed for local teams in the spring, as only one team won its final game — Mount Abraham softball. The No. 2 seed Eagles earned the program's sixth title in seven seasons in dramatic fashion, defeating No. 1 Lyndon, 6-5 in 10 innings. Gretchen Toy, who had already driven in three runs in the final, singled to lead off the top of the 10th, and her courtesy runner scored the winning run. Then Toy, the complete-game winning pitcher, shut down the Vikings in the bottom of the inning.

Fall brought more drama. Two titles came in one weekend. On a Saturday the No. 2 VUHS girls' soccer team took on No. 8 Peoples for the D-III title and prevailed, 2-0, to finish 17-1. Published prognosticators did not believe in the Commodores, nor did the Stowe player who told her coach as she was being subbed out in the semifinal, "We are not losing to this team." Well, check the scoreboard.

No one doubted the winner of the

next day's D-II girls' volleyball title match. No. 1 MUHS had defeated its opponent in the final, No. 3 Enosburg, in the regular season. The 16-1 Tigers also were undefeated against D-II competition this fall. Enosburg battled, but the Tigers made the plays when it mattered as the program won a title in just its second year at the varsity level, three close sets to none. Like the VUHS soccer team, the Tigers talked about team unity afterward.

Another Panther claimed a title this fall — junior cross-country runner Audrey MacLean. Her time of 20:16.8 over 6 kilometers was 48 seconds faster than the runner-up in the NCAA D-III championship race.

Two teams that didn't win a title deserves mention. Coach

Katharine DeLorenzo's Panther field hockey team saw an incredible record eight-season string of NCAA D-III titles snapped with a loss in the quarterfinal round. Congratulations to DeLorenzo and her athletes for all they have accomplished. Honorable mention also to the top-seeded Eagle boys' soccer team, upset in overtime in the D-II final after proving itself the best team in the division all season.

Last, but not least, the Tiger football team capped the 2025 high school season by defeating St. Johnsbury, 13-7, in a bruising D-I final played in South Burlington.

The Tigers ran for 268 yards on 51 attempts, held the Hilltoppers to four yards rushing and a net 144 yards passing, and staved off a late St. Johnsbury rally with a Jason Sperry interception followed by a game-clinching Sperry 4th-down run for a first down as time wound down.

The Tigers finished 10-1, earned the program's 15th championship, and completed the program's 17th straight winning season.

What MUHS senior Cooke Riney said after that game probably sums up how all the championship athletes felt as they celebrated afterward with their friends, families and fans.

"Seeing the community here from Middlebury supporting football, it's amazing," Riney said "There's so much love here."

Fall brought more drama.  
Two titles came in one weekend.

## Homeless

(Continued from Page 13)

43% of all calls they received about housing matters in 2024, up from 28% in 2019.

What can be done to move toward ending homelessness? Advocates point to several steps, all of which will demand more resources and policy shifts. They include:

- Making a major investment in new affordable housing.
- Expanding homeless shelters.

- Ending the criminalization of poverty.
- Ending the criminalization of people who use drugs.
- Doing more to prevent folks from becoming homeless, including beefing up support services and rental subsidies.

"Vermont stands at a moral crossroads: it is long past time to abandon the failed status quo and commit to the bold, sustained investments needed to end homelessness once and for all," the 2025 State of Homelessness in Vermont Report asserts.

# OTHER STORIES THAT CAUGHT OUR EYE

When the reporters and editors sit around the office and weigh the top 10 stories of the preceding year, we always produce a longer list than just 10. We will mention a couple of important stories that could have made the list, but didn't fit.

- One issue that's missing that surely holds a prominent place locally is the saga Addison County State's Attorney Eva Vekos, who all year was facing a state drunken driving charge. But not only that, as the *Independent* reported this past winter, there were some crime victims who were not happy with the way she was handling sensitive cases — sometimes not alerting them when their abusers were being offered a plea deal rather than facing more serious prosecution.

In December, Vekos pleaded no contest to a charge of drunken driving and received a six-month deferred sentence, allowing the conviction to be cleared from her record provided she does not commit any violations during that period. The misdemeanor charge stemmed from an incident nearly two years ago where she was accused by troopers of showing up to a suspicious death scene in Bridport impaired. The head of the state Democratic Party, which backed Vekos when she ran for the post three years ago, said the party would not support her re-election next year and would find someone to run against her if necessary. The county's entire Legislative delegation called for Vekos to step down.

- Vekos wasn't the only elected leader to be in hot water in 2025. In Vergennes, State Rep. Matt Birong drew anger from constituents following a visit to Israel alongside four other Vermont House members and 245 of their legislative counterparts in other states. The trip, known as the Fifty States–One Israel Conference, was held in Jerusalem and sponsored by the Israeli government.

Some of Birong's constituents expressed their disappointment in his presence at the conference following Israel's war on Gaza, which at the time had killed over 65,000 Palestinians, including 18,430 children. In August, the United Nations declared a human-made famine in Gaza, and in mid-September announced that Israel had committed genocide in Gaza.

Birong said he spent his time in Israel speaking with individuals about the conflict and sought to draw a distinction between the people in the conflict and their governments,

though he acknowledged he did not visit Gaza nor did he comment on the number of Palestinians who have lost their lives. He was offered an opportunity to explain himself in the *Independent*, and that still might happen.

- Looking back over 2025 we found a fair number of stories centered around how to keep Vermont traditions/services going despite an aging population and changing times. In March there were efforts to boost attendance and participation at annual town meetings. We wrote about a new course at the Hannaford Career Center that trains the next generation of emergency responders. In 2025 you may have read the story about a partnership that is bringing more youth to civic roles in Bristol. And a story that we have written before popped up again, as firefighters around county were exploring options to improve recruitment of new first responders.

Here are things we saw in 2025 that will come to pass in 2026:

- A couple of local municipalities were trending toward Town Meeting Day votes on whether to implement a local option tax in their communities. In Vergennes, members of the Parks & Recreation Committee highlighted several projects the additional revenue could support, such as completion of the pavilion in Veterans Park and a rec center. Over in Bristol, town officials noted money generated through such a tax could be put toward capital infrastructure projects, economic development and other priorities.

- A story that stayed in our heart came out of Vergennes last winter when Police Sergeant Adam O'Neill knew quickly on New Year's Eve that the woman calling the station was upset. City homeowner Tracy Tembreull was reporting the theft of an item from her family's front porch that in one way could be replaced for just \$30 or \$40 — but actually it was irreplaceable.

Someone had stolen an American flag that she had flown to honor the memory of her brother, Derek Klobuchar, a Purple Heart veteran who had taken his own life in 2018. Police officers learned of the flag's importance and immediately saw that this injustice needed to be repaired. With the help of the American Legion, they replaced the flag and presented it in an emotional ceremony.

- In this newspaper you read about how Bristol and Middlebury got new vending

machines that don't peddle candy bars and soda, but offer potentially lifesaving products to folks battling substance use, who are homelessness and/or have limited resources. And the products the machine offers are free.

- In one edition this year we had two locals earning national recognition. Longtime Salisbury Community School teacher Amy Clapp was named the winner of a Presidential Award for Excellence in Mathematics and Science Teaching, the nation's highest distinction for STEM instructors.

- That same week we reported that Lincoln 17-year-old Estella Laird, who had won a state cross country championship and placed well at New England and national XC meets, had been named the Gatorade Vermont Girls' Cross Country Player of the Year.

- We were happy this year to tell the story of Holly Puterbaugh, 78, and Lois Farnham, 80, who were among three-same sex couples who in 2000 became the face of Vermont's groundbreaking civil unions law. It was the first domino to fall in a national movement that led to same-sex marriage in Massachusetts in 2004, Vermont in 2009, and culminating in federal recognition in 2015.

There are more than 744,000 same-sex married couples in the United States, and each one owes a debt of gratitude to these two endearing, persistent and empathetic women now living their best lives at the Eastview at Middlebury retirement community.

- How about the Lincoln woman who raises monarch butterflies and began cultivating rare all-white monarchs? Or the Emergency Room doctor who had a heart attack in his place of employment, and the quick work of his colleagues was probably what saved his life. We also gave voice to some apple growers who raised money and supplies for their Jamaican pickers whose home island was devastated by a hurricane this fall.

- Another story featured a new club that was creating quite a buzz at the Patricia Hannaford Career Center. It was the Flying Tigers Drone Club, which was attracting a growing number of middle and high school students who enjoy programming and piloting unmanned aerial vehicles. A trio of members had their drones zipping around the room, evading desks, computers, machinery and other potential collision points.



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