

# All potholes are local: A timely look at politics and public works

BRATTLEBORO

From the beginning Vermont has been known for its unique chemistry of work and beauty. Artists and poets alike are drawn to it. The beauty is explicit. The work is not. A winding dirt road, a farmhouse, a stone wall; even a herd of Jerseys grazing on a rock-free hillside involve grueling work which, set in the Vermont landscape, is transported into loveliness.

Key to this chemistry is people, technology and the land itself. Take frost for instance. What if we had the climate of, say, Tennessee? Hilly like Vermont, Tennessee is frost-free. Think what that does to the need to pick stone or set a foundation for a barn or maintain a town road.



Add Vermont's rock covered ups and downs and it becomes clear that Vermonters have always had to work hard — so hard, people “from away” often think they LIKE to work hard. They “cling to the old ways” their grandparents used. (These assessments are often accompanied by a derisive chuckle.)

Not so.

Ira Allen said Vermont was a land of “talented tinkerers.” He was right. Vermonters always tried (often desperately) to “find a better way.” That is why (contrary to much popular thinking) we have always preferred working smart to working hard.

Now comes a new look at this blend of life in Vermont: “On the Job: The Brattleboro Public Works Department” by Wayne Carhart and Charles Fish. All the ingredients are there: the land, the people, the work, and “finding a better way” — the technology.

But the setting is profoundly different. It is a bureaucracy! It features potholes, sewage, grease

## REVIEW BY FRANK M. BRYAN

### Just the Facts

**What:** Authors Wayne Carhart and Charles Fish will discuss and present photos from their new book, “On the Job: The Brattleboro Public Works Department.”

**When:** Thursday, Sept. 10, 7 p.m.

**Where:** Brooks Memorial Library, 224 Main St., Brattleboro.

**Contact:** 802-254-5290.

and diesel fuel.

Talk about your audacity. Are these guys nuts? They could have done a book on Fish and Wildlife or Environmental Protection or the Council on the Arts.

“Na,” they said. “Let’s do a book on rear end differentials, traffic cones, backhoes, culverts and hard hats.”

And you know what?

They did. And it’s beautiful.

It’s beautiful because it is real, because it doesn’t flinch, because its authors had the wisdom, the talent and (yes) the courage to see in “public work” the same elements found in “private work” and to remind us through art that governance can be good, that the end of elections and politics can be in the public interest as it is intended to be.

One would be hard put to find authors better equipped to do this than Carhart and Fish. They know their subject. The prose and photography are perfect. The message is clear.

In the small towns of Vermont, when the snowplow comes down the road natives are apt to say: “Here comes the town.” The road crew is the town.

Carhart and Fish have created for Brattleboro (itself a unique and storied Vermont community) an astute, often beautiful testimony to what real democracy is all about — a people that sees the works of government as an expression of themselves.

Artistically they have put the man in the ditch beside the road

alongside the farmer on the hillside. Politically they have reminded us that in places like

Brattleboro we can see the government. And it is us.

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