

**Town of Durham  
Year End Wrap Up for 2023**

**Todd Selig, Administrator**

**12/31/23**

2023 was a solid year for the Town of Durham. Town staff, elected, and appointed officials worked hard to address the community's needs and maintain transparency, integrity, respect for one another, a welcoming atmosphere, a high quality of life for residents, outstanding service delivery, and improvement in sustainable practices across the organization. Despite competing pressures, we also managed to maintain the municipality's fiscal position and ensure long-term resilience for the community.

Our Independent Auditor's most recent year-end audit (FY 2022) prepared by Plodzick and Sanderson indicates strong financial health with no adverse findings. In addition, Moody's Investors Services continues to indicate that the credit position for Durham is very high quality. Our Aa2 bond rating is a little stronger than the US cities median of Aa3. The Town's unassigned fund balance of the General Fund has increased to \$6,253,954, which is, at long last, in line with Town goals and best practices. These metrics are all indicative of measured success in realizing the Town's fiscal goals.

The FY 2024 proposed General Fund budget, which was unanimously approved unchanged by the Town Council on December 4 2023, is projected to maintain the 2024 municipal portion of the tax rate with a 0% increase. For comparative purposes, the municipal tax rate had remained at \$7.37 (formerly \$8.48 but adjusted due to 2018 statistical revaluation update) for 2015, 2016, 2017 and 2018. The budget was consistent with Council goals. It included the elimination of the annual spring curbside bulky waste pickup commencing in 2024.

The Town Council approved moving forward with Phase I of the Madbury Road Complete Streets Project as part of the FY 2024 CIP, which at full buildout over an anticipated four years, will reconstruct the approximately 8,200 lineal foot Madbury Road corridor, connecting Main Street to Route 4 utilizing a Complete Streets framework. Complete Streets is an approach to planning, designing, building, and maintaining streets that enables safe access for all people who need to use them, including pedestrians, bicyclists, motorists, and transit riders (think Wildcat Transit) of all ages and abilities. The Town was successful in obtaining substantial American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA) funding totaling over \$608,000 to address culvert and drainage improvements associated with the project and continues to pursue external funding for project components, including water

distribution system replacement, sewer collection system rehabilitation, and stormwater system improvements.

The Town Council adopted several notable resolutions in 2023. Resolution #2023-05 recognized resident Craig Seymour for his many years of dedicated community service dating to 1984. Resolution #2023-02 increased the membership of the Human Rights Commission from five to seven. Resolution #2023-09 recognized Administrative Assistant Jennie Berry for her dedicated service upon her retirement after serving 33 years with the Town. Resolution #2023-13 established a policy, proposed by the Trustees of the Trust Funds, for the addition of veterans' names on the memorial at Memorial Park. Resolution #2023-17 recognized June 19<sup>th</sup> as Juneteenth Independence Day and reaffirmed Durham's opposition to any form of oppression. Resolution #2023-18 culminated a year-long effort to rewrite our public assistance guidelines, replacing an older draft that had been adopted more than twenty years earlier. Resolution #2023-19, recommended by the Conservation Commission, recognized traditional indigenous foraging rights on Town lands.

Durham's weekly "Friday Updates" continue to keep the Town Council and members of the community informed of news and happenings in Durham. Nearly 3,600 individuals subscribe to this weekly publication, which doubles as a part of our local emergency broadcast system. Our goal is to keep residents informed of local affairs so they may become engaged when issues are of interest/importance to them. Durham also continues to utilize its web site, Twitter (now X) , and Facebook presence in order to meet the demands of residents' varying preferences for information distribution.

The State requires all real estate within a municipality to be reappraised (revaluated) at least every five years (per RSA 75:8-a) for property tax purposes, so assessments are at their full and true value. To keep in compliance with this law, we contracted with Municipal Resources, Inc. (MRI) to reappraise all residential and commercial properties in Durham for tax year 2023. The project was completed over a two-year period. We greatly appreciate the cooperation of Durham property owners as part of the process. Kudos are extended to the Assessing Office for coordinating the effort.

Durham again received the top-ranking score in NH by the Human Rights Campaign's Municipal Equity Index (MEI) in 2023 relative to addressing LGBTQ inclusive practices - 96 out of 100 points. Durham had sought to be the top scoring NH community twelve years ago when the MEI was launched, and we have to date succeeded; endeavoring to incrementally improve our openness and inclusiveness over time as appropriate. Durham's score is up 2 points over last year.

Three years ago, Durham approved a project to replace the Town's public safety Land and Mobile Radio (LMR) communication infrastructure because it exceeded its scheduled end of life. The 2021 CIP allotted \$1,385,000 (Police - \$665,000 and Fire - \$720,000). The project was initially conceived as a direct replacement for the core infrastructure the Town purchased as part of transitioning dispatching service to the Strafford County Dispatch Center over a decade ago, but ultimately evolved to become a fully redesigned system to better suit the Town's needs. We were notified by the US Department of Justice in 2022 that an application submitted by Durham was approved, and funds were awarded under the COPS Technology and Equipment Program for Durham's LMR project in the amount of \$900,000. This Federal funding ultimately offset a significant portion of the \$1.3M overall project budget. The LMR project is now in service with only punch list items outstanding. It has been a major lift for our IT, police, and fire staff in 2023.

We have a fire department in Durham filled with dedicated, committed, and talented individuals. People who come to work, day after day, year after year, performing important and dangerous tasks, and provide assistance and support to the Durham and UNH combined community with compassion and care. Chief Emanuel has worked with staff over the last two years to develop a strategic plan that will help to guide the department into the future. However, headwinds are impacting the department. Several staff members, after many years of dedicated service, have chosen to move on, some through retirement and others in pursuit of different job opportunities or vocations, and we have struggled to attract new prospects. We have had some long-term medical issues/injuries to work through. An increased competition for personnel between fire departments across NH has emerged providing alternatives for staff in terms of where to work for increasingly competitive pay. And fewer people across society appear to be moving into emergency service professions, making it harder to fill vacancies that do occur across the board. This will demand additional focus in 2024.

The Durham Police Department has long been certified by a professional external accreditation process through CALEA ([www.calea.org](http://www.calea.org)) because it provides the Town with assurances that our department is engaged in providing best practices to Durham citizens as evidenced by ongoing inspections by an outside independent entity. We recognize locally that the delivery of policing services to the community must involve transparency and open opportunities for input and feedback. CALEA provides a comprehensive accreditation review providing a wide array of topical evaluations concerning the department's use of force, police discipline, bias, community engagement, and more. I'm proud of the DPD staff for their ongoing commitment to professional accreditation.

This was a busy year for Durham Parks & Rec. where the department carefully balanced the goal of offering a regular line-up of high-quality events and community programs while continuously working within the limited resources allotted to provide such programming. Despite challenges faced, Parks & Rec. once again had a successful year both financially and through program participation. The presence of our new assistant director has put the department on a path to long-term sustainability.

Through the efforts of Sara Callaghan, our part-time contract Land Stewardship Coordinator, and the Land Stewardship Subcommittee of the Conservation Commission, the Town continues to make significant inroads in sustainably managing the numerous lands and easements under the Town's stewardship.

Oyster River School District School Superintendent James Morse and I remain in regular communication with one another regarding issues of mutual interest and have developed a strong and positive mutual working relationship between the Town and the District. Dr. Morse will be retiring from the district after twelve years of service in June 2024. As part of the hiring process for his successor this fall, the School Board included me as part of its screening subcommittee for prospective candidates.

We completed our first Climate Action Plan (CAP) in 2022, a requirement of the Town's membership with the Global Covenant of Mayors for Climate and Energy. This plan outlines mitigation and adaptation actions, measures how much each action will contribute to Durham meeting its mitigation and adaptation goals, and includes a plan for implementing the identified tasks. It establishes a clear course of action for local efforts toward a reduction in GHG emissions of 2019 levels by 42.8% by 2030, and achieving zero emissions by 2050. The Town will report on progress and update the action strategies every two years. In 2023, our UNH Sustainability Fellow has been updating a Greenhouse Gas Inventory for Durham utilizing 2021 and 2022 data.

The Energy Committee and staff have made numerous strides in our local sustainability efforts, in particular shepherding an initiative for the Town to join the Community Power Coalition of New Hampshire (CPCNH) to work toward providing wider accessibility of green energy for our community's residential and business electric utility customers, at a price equal to or less than Eversource, and working to assist Durham residents and business owners make the built environment more energy efficient, thereby reducing overall emissions. As part of this work, we are right now poised to launch Durham Community Power, offered through CPCNH, in February 2024.

The Integrated Waste Management Advisory Committee (IWMAC) and our DPW staff are working on a variety of initiatives associated with reducing solid waste generation, increasing recycling participation, and supporting composting. As part of our upcoming planned DPW solid waste collection vehicle replacement program in 2024/25, we are moving forward with a volume-based collection system in which each household will be issued a standard size solid waste collection container for trash and another for recycling. DPW will then accept solid waste, limiting trash materials collected curbside to what can fit within the issued standard-size receptacles, utilizing new collection vehicles equipped with hydraulic arms to grab and dump each container, thereby encouraging less solid waste per household generation, enhancing recycling, and reducing employee exposure to potential lift, poke, and strain injuries. A new "Sustainable Durham" branding campaign spearheaded by the IWMAC but available for use for other sustainability-related initiatives was also launched in 2023. Finally, DPW was able to secure external state grant funds to offset 45% of the purchase price of two electric (EV) collection vehicles, which if secured, we understand would be the first two EV collection trucks in NH.

Much work has been undertaken by the Energy Committee, the Town Council, and the Planning Board on a revamp of our zoning ordinance with respect to the topic of solar energy systems. After literally years of review, public hearings, and revisions, the Town Council adopted a comprehensive ordinance framework in 2023.

A number of high profile applications were concluded by the Planning Board in 2022/2023: a new project at 74 Main Street was approved and appealed (still pending in Superior Court); a new subdivision off Gerrish/ Ambler was approved, appealed, remanded back to the board, approved by the board, and appealed again to Superior Court, denied, and appealed by the abutter to the NH Supreme Court (still pending); the long-standing application for redevelopment of the Mill Plaza was denied, appealed, and ultimately withdrawn by the owner prior to selling the property outright to Torrington Properties; and a parking lot proposal on Church Hill at 19-21 Main Street was denied, appealed, and ultimately withdrawn. Each of these projects demanded significant time and energy from the Planning Board, citizens coming to express their perspectives, applicants, and staff. The Planning Board also spent a good deal of time in 2023 working to methodically review and provide recommended updates to definitions as needed within the Zoning Ordinance.

The Housing Task Force has been working to analyze the Seacoast NH regional housing inventory and to advocate for a balanced housing mix within the Durham community, providing a variety of choices that meet the economic, environmental, social, and physical needs of the community's current and future

residents, including those of varying financial resources. An initial set of recommendations was sent by the Task Force to the Planning Board in 2022 for initial review, which generated some spirited community engagement this year. The Town Council extended the charge for the Housing Task Force in 2023 to enable the committee to continue its important work.

Following the breaking of ties with Elliott Sidewalk Communities concerning the redevelopment of 66 Main Street in 2022, a working group of Town and UNH officials met in early 2023 to think anew about how the Town might want to move forward with a redevelopment at this strategically placed downtown Durham parcel. It was mutually decided to wait until both Durham and UNH had completed separate housing needs assessments and circle back to touch base and discuss further in early 2024. The parties are also interested in observing over time implications stemming from the Covid-19 pandemic for downtown Durham including commerce, housing, parking, and traffic patterns.

The Durham Town Council voted 7-2 on September 13, 2021, to award a Final Design Contract to Vanasse Hagen Brustlin, Inc. (VHB) for removal of the Mill Pond Dam. Subsequently, the Town Clerk on October 18, 2021, certified a referendum petition to put the approval of the VHB final design contract to a vote of the residents of the Town of Durham. On November 1, 2021, following receipt of the referendum petition, the Council rescinded the initial September 13, 2021 contract approval that triggered the petition, and then awarded the project again but this time contingent upon the outcome of a referendum vote at the annual Town election on Tuesday, March 8, 2022. The question (Question 2) put before the voters of Durham was: *"Shall the Town reverse the action of the Town Council taken on November 1, 2021 to remove the Mill Pond Dam?"* The final referendum vote was: Yes - 596 (26%); No- 1706 (74%). The total number of votes cast on March 8, 2022 was 2365. The average turnout for a Town annual election over the last 10 years has been 1081. Subsequent to the vote, Town staff began pursuing external grant funding opportunities to support the cost of dam removal, working with the US Army Corps of Engineers and the NH Division of Historic Resources, as part of a Section 106 historic mitigation review, and planning engineering for the project. The historic mitigation, design, wetland permitting, and contract development have all been in process in 2023 with permit applications anticipated to be submitted in early 2024 and dam removal commencing in 2024 or possibly 2025, depending upon timing of the various detailed steps involved.

Years of planning paid off this fall when Durham representatives went to the State House to receive a Land and Community Heritage Investment Program (LCHIP) award from Gov. Chris Sununu. The \$286,000 grant will help pay for rehabilitation of the historic Bickford-Chesley House at Wagon Hill Farm. Local

resident historians Nancy Sandberg, Janet Mackie, Charlotte Hitchcock, and Carolyn Singer worked with Public Works Director Rich Reine to prepare the LCHIP grant application for funding to support much needed improvements to the building. Exterior and interior restoration, and renovation are needed to return the building to a fully usable condition including ADA accessibility. The improvements will accommodate the building's adaptive reuse, which will ultimately create a caretaker's apartment on the second floor and public uses including an exhibit gallery and meeting rooms on the first floor. The Bickford-Chesley House Gallery will house temporary exhibits on Durham's history as well as the work of local artists. Wagon Hill Farm is on land originally occupied by the Indigenous Abenaki, and it became one of the first farms in the area to be settled by English colonists. It remained in continuous agricultural use for nearly 300 years. In addition to the LCHIP grant of \$286,600, the Town received a Moose Plate Grant in the amount of \$20,000 for a total of \$306,600 capital funding. Work on the Bickford-Chesley House is expected to begin in late Spring 2024.

The National Fish and Wildlife Foundation and the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration announced a November 2023 round of funding for National Coastal Resilience Fund projects. \$1.9 million in funding has been earmarked to create a living shoreline to stabilize an additional 1,835 linear feet of tidal shoreline and restore both 4,060 square feet of salt marsh habitat and 2,810 square feet of tidal buffer at Wagon Hill Farm. The project will stabilize severe erosion while protecting and increasing the adaptive capacity of critical conservation and community spaces. This is a continuation of our living shoreline project dating back to 2019.

Durham continues to work closely with the City of Portsmouth to ensure Portsmouth's access across Wagon Hill Farm to their water line crossing Little Bay is undertaken with as little disruption as possible to the property and the quiet enjoyment thereof by our residents.

We have painstakingly worked over many years to create a municipal water system that is inherently resilient in order to reliably provide approximately 1.2 million gals/day of water to both Town and the UNH campus. Together, Durham/UNH operate four water sources, one of which utilizes an artificial recharge system pumping raw water from the Lamprey River to our Spruce Hole Aquifer in Lee during times of plentiful flow, increasing our reserves for drought conditions. This, combined with a new state of the art \$20 million Water Treatment Plant on the UNH campus (funded 100% by UNH), places the combined Durham/UNH community in a very sustainable position in the face of anticipated climate change.

Durham and UNH, through the joint administrative Water, Wastewater, Stormwater, and Roads Committee, continue to cooperatively address a multitude of Town/Gown items to include efficient operation of our combined water system as described above, focusing attention on water quality deficiencies within the Great Bay Estuary as identified by the NHDES and the EPA, meeting EPA wastewater and stormwater MS-4 mandates under our EPA Total Nitrogen General Permit, maintaining a required NHDES backflow prevention program, general water/sewer infrastructure, our Lee water line to address MBTE contamination at the Lee Traffic Circle, and more. I hope residents understand that on the front lines of our utility infrastructure both on and off campus, the Town and the University are joined at the hip and work seamlessly together.

I'd like to once again acknowledge our modest but mighty Team of Town employees within public works, police, fire, planning, zoning, town clerk/tax collector's office, informational technology, DCAT, and more – all outstanding people, working hard with finite resources to meet the needs of a demanding citizenry with high expectations for exceptional service delivery. Our Town Council is comprised of thoughtful, hard-working, and dedicated individuals with varied backgrounds and perspectives. The Council, along with the benefit of ongoing public feedback and active involvement by dedicated citizens on local boards, committees, and commissions, all contribute to ensuring Durham remains a strong, vibrant, and welcoming community. Thank you, one and all.