

Town of Durham  
Year End Wrap Up for 2018

Todd Selig, Administrator

12/31/18

Town staff, elected, and appointed officials are working to address community needs, control costs, and maintain the municipality's fiscal position despite many competing pressures. From preserving the quality of life within our traditional residential neighborhoods, to grappling with human rights and societal issues, to managing development pressures, to taking significant steps to protect the health of the Great Bay Estuary with respect to the proposed \$85 million Eversource Seacoast Reliability Project, many individuals have collectively worked diligently on behalf of the community in 2018.

According to Moody's Investors Service as of 12/19/18, Durham's credit position is very good, and its Aa2 bond rating is slightly stronger than the median rating of Aa3 for U.S. cities. Notable credit factors include a very healthy financial position, a modestly sized tax base with a very strong wealth and income profile, an affordable debt burden, and a somewhat elevated pension (N.H. Retirement System) liability. Durham's cash balance as a percent of operating revenues (88.7%) is far superior to the U.S. median. Of note, this metric contracted from 2013 to 2017, which was one of Durham's overt financial goals. Moody's reports the economy and tax base of Durham are very healthy overall and are comparable to its Aa2 rating. The median family income equates to a robust 182.9% of the U.S. level.

The Town Council's goals in 2018 envisioned developing a budget for FY 2019 that kept the local municipal portion of the tax rate unchanged at \$7.37 (formerly \$8.48 but adjusted due to 2018 statistical revaluation update) for an unprecedented fifth year in a row. Through a very deliberative budget process this ultimately proved infeasible as a result of little new revenue or additional new taxable value coming on line. The Council, working with staff, was able to bring the projected 2019 budget in at an increase of 23 cents or 3.12%. It is estimated to cost the average Durham property taxpayer with a home valued at \$350,000 an additional \$80.50 in taxes. This does not take into account the numerous grants that municipal departments have obtained over the course of the year enabling us to address issues such as shoreline erosion at Wagon Hill Farm, planning for projected sea level rise associated with Climate Change, water/sewer projects, public safety needs, and more.

In March 2017, residents voted overwhelmingly (846-101) to support renovations/expansion at the Durham Police Department located at 86 Dover Road totaling \$1,960,000. *"The department is humbled by the turnout on such a wintry day,"* Police Chief David Kurz said in a statement after the results were announced. The site had originally been purchased and renovated in 1997 to serve as the Town's police facility and was in need of significant improvements. Staff have worked diligently since

that time to oversee the construction of a first rate police facility, which is now fully operational – completed on time and on budget. The station now has a larger women’s locker room and evidence storage space, modern day energy efficiencies, universal access, an enclosed sally port, and an enclosed entryway at the rear. Durham residents Bill Schoonmaker and Water Rous were the architects of record for this excellent project. Police Chief David Kurz and Business Manager Gail Jablonski, with the assistance of Public Works Director Lynch, ensured the project proceeded smoothly.

Durham’s 12,187 sq. ft. state-of-the-art Town Hall at 8 Newmarket Road entered its fifth year of operation on October 23, 2018. Following an extensive RFP process, Durham ultimately sold the former Town Office site at 15 Newmarket Road to a local technology company, Applied Geosolutions, for the sum of \$650,000. Applied Geosolutions subsequently invested around \$600,000 in the building utilizing Federal historic tax credits, ensuring that the redevelopment of the site did not impact its place on the National Register of Historical Places. The property is now fully operational, has maintained its historic integrity, and is back on the tax rolls!

Oyster River School District Superintendent of Schools James Morse and I continue to work to remain in active communication with one another regarding issues of mutual interest/concern. It is important to note as well that Town Councilors Kenny Rotner and Allan Howland are also members of the ORCSD School Board, and in this way ensure there is good communication between Durham and the ORCSD School Board relative to issues of mutual interest.

The Town addressed a number of difficult social issues this year. In April, due to the intervention of the Human Rights Commission, the controversial “Cruel Adversity” mural at the U.S. Post Office in Durham at long last received an interpretative poster to place the image in proper historical context. The Oyster River Cooperative School District followed Durham’s lead and recognized the 2<sup>nd</sup> Monday in October as Indigenous Peoples’ Day in within the district affirming our local commitment to promoting understanding, friendship, and the well-being and growth of our indigenous community, making Oyster River and Durham the first community/school district combination in the state to do so. We again received the top ranking score in NH by the Human Rights Campaign’s Municipal Equity Index relative to addressing GLBT-Q concerns. The commission also addressed the issue of the annual Tree Lighting in Memorial Park, which sparked a wider conversation about inclusivity and religious display on town property, a topic that will continue to be discussed in 2019. Finally, new welcoming roadway signage was installed at the various entrances to Durham in 2018 with the statement, “A Welcoming Community.”

Our weekly “Friday Updates” serves to keep the Town Council and members of the community informed of news and happenings in Durham. Over 3,200 individuals subscribe to this weekly broadcast. Durham also continues to bolster its Twitter and Facebook presence in order to meet the demands of residents’ changing preferences for information distribution. Our goal is to keep residents informed of local affairs so they may become engaged when issues are of interest to them.

We are a community that truly welcomes and encourages citizen involvement/engagement, and visitors from the around the world visit Durham to learn from our efforts as part of World Affairs Council of N.H. programming in conjunction with the U.S. State Department Bureau of Visitor Affairs. In many respects, we have the privilege of discussing challenging topics in Durham in part due to the openness of our local government and in part due to the talented staff and Town Councilors who work tirelessly to keep the municipality prudently managed and on an even keel, allowing citizens to focus their efforts on deeper social, quality of life, and aspirational issues.

Over the last year, Durham has continued to pursue Long-Term Economic as well as Environmental Sustainability, which are inextricably linked. Without economic sustainability, the Town will not have the financial resources available over the long-term to stabilize the tax rate, pursue desired projects or necessary municipal infrastructure enhancements, preserve open space, etc. Without a healthy natural environment, we will not sustain the Durham in which residents hope and desire to live, work, and play. Both the 2011 and 2017 Master Plan processes indicate residents of the community seek balance.

Long-time Durham resident (and retired UNH Professor) Dennis Meadows, Director and Treasurer of LaTailede/USA, a non-profit NH corporation, purchased and donated to the Town in 2018 the 5.3 acre property along Newmarket Road directly adjacent to the so-called Mill Pond Center fields, upon which Durham (and the Southeast Land Trust) already holds a conservation easement. Many residents may not know that some of the most visible parts of the field comprising this gateway into town is in fact the 30 Newmarket Road parcel and NOT part of the former Mill Pond Center parcel. Dr. Meadows' donation to preserve this important tract of land for the future in its natural state is absolutely wonderful and extraordinarily commendable. I'm so pleased we could work with him to bring this matter to fruition.

Through the efforts of Ellen Snyder, our part-time contract Land Stewardship Coordinator, and the Land Stewardship Subcommittee of the Conservation Commission, we have at long last made significant inroads in properly managing the numerous lands and easements under the Town's stewardship. The Council also established the Durham Town Land Stewardship Patron's Trust in 2018 to enable citizens or organizations to donate money to support our local conservation land management efforts, rather than relying solely on tax dollars for this purpose.

The Town and UNH, through the joint administrative Water, Wastewater, Stormwater, and Roads Committee, continue to address a multitude of Town/Gown items to include efficient operation of the Spruce Hole Well, focusing attention on water quality deficiencies within the Great Bay Estuary (nitrogen) as identified by the NHDES and the EPA, meeting EPA wastewater and stormwater MS-4 mandates, implementing a required NHDES backflow prevention program, general water/sewer infrastructure, the Lee water line extension in coordination with the NHDES and the Town of Lee to address MBTE contamination at the Lee Traffic Circle, and more. 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.

UNH issued new RFPs for the redevelopment of 66 Main Street, also known as the ATO site, as a mixed use development, and the Hetzel and Alexander Halls for a new hotel. The RFPs envision a high quality hotel and upscale restaurant, along with desirable office and commercial space. Both projects are now in the early stages of conceptual review before the Planning Board moving into 2019.

Durham and UNH negotiation teams met extensively in 2015/2016 to discuss and ultimately agree upon a variety of topics/agreements which were subsequently approved by the Town and UNH in 2016 as follows: Agreement to renegotiate the Municipal Services (Omnibus) Agreement which expired 12/31/18; MOU on Long-Range Planning Coordination and Communication; Fire Protection Services Agreement; Jackson's Landing Boat Launch Agreement (for 1 year); MOU on University Outdoor Swimming Pool; The School Agreement; Transfer of Real Property Agreement (transferring ownership of the "Tot Lot" and Oyster River Park to Durham, which took place in 2017); and the Water and Wastewater System Agreement. This suite of agreements represented a significant undertaking and accomplishment. The parties continued extensive discussions relative to the Omnibus Agreement in 2018, and in particular roadways and policing (finalized and approved by the Town Council this year), and a long-term Jackson's Landing Agreement.

Under the leadership of Director Rachel Gasowski and the Parks & Recreation Committee, we've seen interest and participation in Parks & Recreation programming flourish in Durham. Durham's vision for its Parks & Recreation Department is that it will offer a wide variety of opportunities and concentrations for all residents of any age wishing to participate in accessible, affordable activities. The department also plans/coordinates community-wide events such as Durham Day, summer children's programming in conjunction with the school district, the summer concert series, as well as managing the Churchill Rink.

After discussing an alleged incident involving the draft for baseball teams in the spring of 2018, Town Councilors gave consideration this fall to the Oyster River Youth Association funding for 2019 as part of the annual budget process. ORYA had asked for \$44,025. The Council ultimately approved \$28,000 for OYRA in 2019 contingent upon the public release of audited financial records and management letters for the fiscal year ending July 31, 2018.

In response to the goal of becoming a more pedestrian and bicycle-friendly community, Durham moved forward numerous efforts in 2015 and 2016 to delineate roadways within our downtown core with "share the road" (or sharrows) markings and signage. 45 such yellow signs on wooden posts were ultimately installed throughout the community, and in 2018 a few additional roadways were painted with sharrows markings to broaden our network. Efforts to better delineate and safely address bicycle and pedestrian friction points utilizing Transportation Engineer Dirk Grotenhuis' services

were evaluated and discussed by the Council in 2016. Many recommendations were acted upon, including the application of green paint within bicycle areas at specific intersections in the downtown to assist bicyclists in navigating the downtown core more effectively and safely. In 2017, the focus was on updating the joint Durham/UNH downtown traffic model for AM and PM peak demand. An updated traffic model of both AM and PM peak demand was completed in spring 2018, which will prove very useful as we work to further improve all forms of transportation locally, both on and off campus. Looking ahead to 2019, we hope to bring on professional transportation planning expertise on an as needed basis to continue to bolster our pedestrian/bicycle environment in town.

Following a national search in which representatives from Durham participated, a unanimous vote of the University System board of trustees appointed James W. Dean Jr. as the 20th president of the University of New Hampshire, effective June 30, 2018. Dean succeeded Mark W. Huddleston, who retired after 11 years leading UNH.

As I have mentioned in the past, residents who live in Durham are smart, entrepreneurial, always taking the long-term perspective, focused on the environment, community-oriented, and committed to quality education. Durham is blessed with significant natural resources as well: the Great Bay, the Oyster River, the Lamprey River, the Spruce Hole Bog, Wagon Hill Farm, numerous natural gateways leading into and out of the community, and more. But it is not only that we have these natural treasures. Durham has had the foresight to protect them through local decision-making, good planning, prudent management by staff and volunteers alike, and a lot of hard work. Meanwhile, the University of New Hampshire provides social, cultural, and athletic opportunities for the community, not to mention it's an economic driver for Durham and the entire region.

In closing, I would like to note that our town employees — public works, police, fire, planning, zoning, Town Clerk/Tax Collector's Office, IT, and more — are good people, working hard with limited resources to meet the needs of a demanding citizenry with high expectations for exceptional service delivery at the local level.

While taxes are undeniably high in Durham, for all of these reasons, home sales remain strong, commercial investment is active, downtown vacancies are almost non-existent, the tax base continues to grow, the Town is beautiful, and a positive sense of community is pervasive.

The Town Council voted unanimously in 2017 to extend my employment contract as Administrator for an additional 9-year term through December 31, 2025. Now in my 18<sup>th</sup> year of service to the community, I'm looking forward to the next 7 years in town.

All in all, it has once again been a solid year for Durham.