

Town of Durham
Year End Wrap Up for 2022
Todd Selig, Administrator
12/31/22

Reflecting on this past year as we move beyond the Covid-19 pandemic, Town staff, elected, and appointed officials have worked to address community needs, maintain transparency, integrity, and respect for one another, maintain the municipality's fiscal position despite competing pressures, and ensure long-term resilience.

Our Independent Auditor's most recent year-end audit (FY 2021) prepared by Melanson indicates strong financial health with no findings. In addition, Moody's Investors Services indicates 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. Notable credit factors include a robust financial position, a very strong wealth and income profile, and an adequate tax base. It also reflects a small debt burden. The financial position of the Town was robust and identified as relatively favorable in comparison to the Aa2 rating assigned. These indices are all indicative of measured success in realizing the Town's fiscal goals.

Durham's weekly "Friday Updates" continue to keep the Town Council and members of the community informed of news and happenings in Durham. Nearly 3,500 individuals subscribe to this weekly broadcast. 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, and Facebook presence in order to meet the demands of residents' changing preferences for information distribution. Look for a web site facelift in 2023.

Durham again received the top-ranking score in NH by the Human Rights Campaign's Municipal Equity Index relative to addressing LGBTQ concerns - 92 out of 100 points. We sponsored programming celebrating Indigenous Peoples' Day in 2019, 2020, 2021, and 2022. The Human Rights Commission also organized training around the topic of implicit bias in 2022 to give our citizen volunteer board members and staff additional skills to help make the organization as inclusive as it can be.

Durham Public Works and the Madbury Road Complete Streets Project Team are in the design phase for construction improvements to the approximately 8,200 lineal foot Madbury Road corridor, connecting Main Street in downtown Durham to Route 4. The Design phase is scheduled to continue

through 2022/2023 with the first phase of major culvert construction tentatively planned for the 2023 construction season. The Town was successful in obtaining substantial American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA) funding totaling over \$608,000 for these critical culvert and drainage improvements and continues to aggressively pursue funding for other project components, including water distribution system replacement, sewer collection system rehabilitation, and stormwater/drainage system improvements. The project team has advanced the design to address several of the issues that have been raised during two separate public forums, which include two main alternatives to address issues such as traffic calming, pedestrians, streetscape, sustainable design, and multimodal transportation.

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 initial engineering. It is anticipated the historic mitigation, design, wetland permitting, and contract development will be undertaken in 2023 with dam removal commencing in 2024.

As part of the 2021 Capital Improvement Plan (CIP) Durham approved a project to replace the Town’s public safety core Land and Mobile Radio (LMR) communication infrastructure because it exceeds its scheduled end of life. The 2021 CIP allotted \$1,385,000 (Police - \$665,000 and Fire - \$720,000) in two lines for this project. 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 became a fully redesigned system to better suit Durham’s needs. We were notified on September 30, 2022, by the US Department of Justice that the Town’s application submission was approved, and funds were awarded under

the COPS Technology and Equipment Program for the LMR project in the amount of \$900,000. The \$900,000 in Federal funding will ultimately offset a significant portion of the \$1.3M overall project budget. The LMR project is now being built out over a twelve-to-eighteen-month period.

The Durham Police Department has long been certified by a professional external accreditation process through CALEA (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. CALEA accreditation also provides feedback from outside subject-specific professionals about new and innovative practices that may be applicable to the Durham community. With all of the national discussions surrounding police, we recognize locally that the delivery of 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 about the department's use of force, police discipline, bias, community engagement, and more.

This was again a busy year for Durham Parks & Recreation where the department carefully balanced the goal of offering a regular line-up of events and programs while continuously adapting plans and efforts around the ongoing challenges associated with Covid-19. Despite the challenges the department faced, it once again had a very successful year both financially and with program registrations. Welcoming aboard our first full time assistant director, Kellie DeSimone, put the department on a path to long-term sustainability.

Oyster River School District Superintendent of Schools James Morse and I continue to work to remain in regular communication with one another regarding issues of mutual interest/concern and have developed a strong and positive relationship. Construction of the new net zero, LEED Certified Middle School was a top priority and area of focus again in 2022, a project for which Durham modified traffic patterns around the facility along Dennison Avenue, Coe Drive, and Strafford Avenue.

Much work has been undertaken by Town Councilor Jim Lawson, the Energy Committee, the Town Council, and the Planning Board to date on a revamp to our zoning ordinance with respect to the topic of solar energy systems. After literally years of review, public hearings, and revisions, the Town Council is poised to take up the most recent suite of draft changes to consider in January 2023.

With the help of UNH Sustainability Fellows, Durham has completed our first Climate Action Plan (CAP), a requirement of the Town's membership with

the Global Covenant of Mayors for Climate and Energy. This plan outlines mitigation and adaptation actions, measure how much each action will contribute to Durham meeting its mitigation and adaptation goals and includes a plan for implementing the actions. Mitigation actions focus on reducing the Town's greenhouse gas emissions (GHG), while adaptation actions focus on adapting Durham to climate change impacts. The plan 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. Strategies were based on local community input as well as research into best practices being pursued in communities across the state, region, nation, and the globe. The Town will report on progress and update the action strategies every two years. It is important to note that while UNH and the Town are making concrete efforts to reduce their GHG emissions, it is largely up to community members whether or not we meet our goals.

The Energy Committee and staff have also 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 and working to assist Durham residents and business owners make the built environment more energy efficient, thereby reducing overall emissions.

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 contemplating a transition to a volume-based collection system in which each household would be issued a standard size solid waste collection container for trash and another for recycling. DPW would then accept solid waste -- limiting trash materials collected curbside to what can fit within the issued standard-size receptacle -- utilizing new collection vehicles equipped with hydraulic arms to grab and dump each container, thereby encouraging less solid waste 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 is also under way for a 2023 launch.

A number of high-profile applications were concluded by the Planning Board in 2022: a new project at 74 Main Street was approved; a new subdivision off Gerrish/ Ambler was approved, appealed, remanded back to the board, approved, and appealed again; the long-standing application for redevelopment

of the Mill Plaza was denied; and a parking lot proposal on Church Hill at 19-21 Main Street was denied. Each of these projects has demanded significant time and energy by the Planning Board, citizens coming to express their perspectives, applicants, and staff – with three of the four involving court proceedings on appeal.

Following the breaking of ties with Elliott Sidewalk Communities concerning the redevelopment of 66 Main Street, we currently plan in 2023 to think anew about how the Town might want to move forward with a redevelopment at this strategically placed downtown Durham parcel.

The Housing Task Force has been working to identify, analyze, and advocate for a more balanced and diverse supply of housing in Durham. An initial set of recommendations was sent by the Task Force to the Planning Board for initial review, resulting in significant community engagement there. The Housing Task Force will continue to evaluate this issue and work to refine its recommendations.

Plans are being developed for an historic renovation/refurbishment of the Bickford-Chesley Farmhouse at Wagon Hill Farm. Roof replacement and soffit work is planned in 2023. More significant historically-appropriate renovations are being developed to protect the entire building envelope from further water damage, improve deteriorating interior spaces, and create a caretaker apartment on the second floor with historic display and meeting space on the first floor. We also anticipate pursuing additional NH Land and Community Heritage Investment Program (LCHIP) funding in 2023 to support a portion of the total project cost with renovations likely in 2024.

Durham completed work with the Strafford Regional Planning Commission (SRPC) in early-2022 utilizing NHDES funding to study the potential impact of sea level rise on fresh water private wells within the community. It was an interesting initiative focusing on an issue that, until now, has literally been out of site and out of mind. And ongoing work on the new Climate Adaptation Chapter of the Durham Master Plan and an update to our 2017 Hazard Mitigation Plan are also under way.

Projected sea level rise will contribute, in the years ahead, to the gradual inundation of coastal areas. A new living shoreline (Phase I) at the Town's Wagon Hill Farm was completed in late 2019, affording Durham 350 feet of shoreline re-graded, armored with natural hard and soft-scape materials, and planted to restore the salt marsh and tidal buffer that had eroded over time. It's a project that took 4+ years of design and close collaboration between the Town, State/Federal regulators, the NHDES Coastal Program, the Harbor Master, the

Strafford Regional Planning Commission, and UNH environmental researchers utilizing around \$500,000 in local and state grant funds. It has become a regional demonstration project for living shorelines, and an additional \$213,765 was targeted for 2021/2022 utilizing monies negotiated with Eversource, along with matching funds from a highly competitive National Fish & Wildlife Foundation grant, to continue to make shoreline stabilization enhancements at the property (Phases II and III) and beyond within the Great Bay region. We anticipate the next phase, utilizing some of the same pots of money, to take place within the 2023-25 timeframe.

Durham is working 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 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 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 \$20 million Water Treatment Plant on the UNH campus (funded 100% by UNH) deploying state of the art technology - places the combined Durham/UNH community in a very sustainable position in the face of anticipated climate change.

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 our water combined system as described above, 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 under our EPA Total Nitrogen General Permit, maintaining a required NHDES backflow prevention program, general water/sewer infrastructure, the Lee water line extension in coordination with the NHDES (completed in 2022) to address MBTE contamination at the Lee Traffic Circle, and more. Residents should 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.

Through the efforts of Tom Brightman (who took the reins in early 2021 from Ellen Snyder), our part-time contract Land Stewardship Coordinator, and the Land Stewardship Subcommittee of the Conservation Commission, the Town continues to make significant inroads in actively managing the numerous lands

and easements under the Town's stewardship. The Council also established the Durham Town Land Stewardship Patron's Trust back 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. These monies, as well as the Conservation Fund under the oversight of the Conservation Commission, have provided an ongoing source of modest funding to move targeted stewardship initiatives forward. Tom Brightman notified the Town of his upcoming departure from the position in December 2022 and Durham resident Sara Callaghan was contracted to take the reins from Tom beginning in January 2023.

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 have contracted with Municipal Resources, Inc. (MRI) to reappraise all residential and commercial properties in Durham for tax year 2023. The project is being completed over a two-year period. There are five major phases to a full revaluation: Data Collection and Sales Review, Market Analysis, Valuation, Field Review, and Informal Hearings. During the summer of 2022, the data collection phase of the project began where staff members from MRI began to measure the exterior, and inspect the interior, of all structures in Durham to make sure the data regarding each property is accurate. A statistical update will be completed in 2023 to bring all properties with updated physical data to full and true market value. We greatly appreciate the cooperation of every property owner.

I would like to formally acknowledge our small but mighty Team of Town employees within public works, police, fire, planning, zoning, town clerk/tax collector's office, informational technology, Durham Community Access Television, 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 at the local level. 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. It's a Team effort.