

Town of Durham
Year End Wrap Up for 2017

Todd Selig, Administrator

12/31/17

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 issues, to managing development pressures, to taking steps (in excess of \$100,000 to date) to protect the health of the Great Bay Estuary with respect to the proposed \$70 million Eversource Seacoast Reliability Project, many individuals have collectively worked diligently on behalf of the community in 2017. In short, the Town of Durham continues to be economically and prudently operated.

According to Moody's Investors Service as of 12/1/17, the credit and financial position for Durham is very strong. Its Aa2 rating is slightly higher than the US cities median of Aa3. Key credit factors include a robust financial position, an affluent socioeconomic profile, and an adequate tax base. It also reflects a moderate debt burden and a somewhat elevated pension liability as a result of challenges within the NH Retirement System. Durham's cash balance as a percent of operating revenues (100.2%) far exceeds the US median, however, this percentage has decreased between 2012 and 2016. Our fund balance as a percent of operating revenues (24.6%) is slightly weaker than other Moody's-rated cities nationwide. The economy and tax base of Durham are very healthy overall and are in line with Town's Aa2 rating. The median family income equates to a robust 181.8% of the US level. In addition, NH's economy continues to expand, largely attributed to the southeastern region of the state, which benefits from the vibrant Boston economy.

The Town Council's goals in 2017 tasked the Administrator with developing a budget for FY 2018 that kept the local municipal portion of the tax rate unchanged at \$8.48 for the fourth year in a row. Through a very deliberative budget process, the Council, working with staff, was able to fulfill its goal.

In March of this year, 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. When finished, the station will have 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 are the architects of record for this excellent project, which should be complete by spring 2018.

Durham's 12,187 sq. ft. state-of-the-art Town Hall at 8 Newmarket Road entered its fourth year of operation on October 23, 2017. 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 is currently investing around \$600,000 in the building. The Town has required that any redevelopment of the site not impact its spot on the National Register of Historical Places. Construction is underway although the project is moving ahead very slowly. The property is now back on the tax rolls.

The new UNH Outdoor Pool opened to great fanfare in the fall of last year and enjoyed its first full year of operation in 2017. Resident feedback concerning the pool has been extraordinarily positive. At 14,355 sq. ft., the +/- \$6.5 million structure paid for fully by UNH is one of the largest outdoor pools in New Hampshire. The Town Council has allocated the sum of \$30,000 to subsidize the annual pool pass cost for Durham residents by providing a 20% reduction off the annual purchase price. Passes are purchased at the Hamel Recreation Center.

The Town addressed a number of difficult social issues this year: The controversial "Cruel Adversity" mural at the US Post Office in Durham; whether the Town should become a so-called "Sanctuary City" which we did not do; expanding the membership of the Human Rights Commission to be more diverse; and on September 18, 2017, the Council by resolution recognized the 2nd Monday in October as Indigenous Peoples' Day in Durham affirming our local commitment to promoting understanding, friendship, and the well-being and growth of our indigenous community, making Durham the first community in the state to do so. The Council also adopted a resolution declaring Durham as a welcoming community. New welcoming roadway signage will be installed at the various entrances to Durham in spring 2018.

A review was undertaken in 2017 resulting in an update to the disabled exemption and elderly exemption programs available to eligible Durham property owners.

As part of a detailed settlement agreement in the matter of Cutter Beech Hill, LLC V. Town of Durham, the parties resolved a dispute of ownership of the land upon which the Town's 650,000 gallon water tank atop Beech Hill sits, as well as right-of-way access to that site.

The Town updated its Street Vending ordinance to address unsafe conditions created by various booksellers and textbook buyers operating along busy Main Street soliciting their services to college students. The change, prohibiting such activity in dangerous locations within downtown Durham, was controversial, challenged in Strafford County Superior Court by a bookseller, and ultimately the Town prevailed in the case.

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 has once again bolstered its Twitter and Facebook presence in order to meet the demands of residents’ changing preferences for information distribution. For example, 820 individuals have signed up for our Twitter feed (a 17% increase from 2016) and we have a Facebook reach of over 3,100 individuals. 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.

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/infrastructure, 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.

The Town successfully worked closely in 2016 with the Southeast Land Trust as part of an effort to conserve the 40 +/- acre Thompson Forest parcel located along Wednesday Hill Road abutting the Durham-UNH Water System pump station on the Lamprey River. In 2017, through the efforts of Ellen Snyder, our new part-time contract Land Stewardship Coordinator, we have made significant strides in actually managing this parcel, as well as numerous other lands under the Town’s stewardship.

Meanwhile, Durham worked with the Society of the Protection of NH Forests in 2016 and 2017 relative to securing a conservation easement on the 40 +/- acre Hills/Emery Farm property located along Route 4 directly across from the Emery Farm farm stand. We hope to bring the matter to fruition in 2018. And the “Powder Major” (or Goss family) project consisting of approximately 227 acres at the juncture of Durham, Lee, and Madbury near Tibbetts Field/Rt.155 in Madbury was conserved this year in partnership with the Forest Society.

The Town and UNH, through the joint administrative Water, Wastewater, and Stormwater Committee, continue to address a multitude of Town/Gown items to include efficient operation of the new 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, and more. While at times politics might get hot and heavy between Durham and UNH, 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 another RFP for the redevelopment of 66 Main Street also known as the ATO site, and potentially including Hetzel and Alexander Halls across the street on

UNH property. The RFP specified a boutique hotel, and upscale restaurant, along with desirable office and commercial space. There were 3 respondents. Only one remained as meeting the RFP criteria and the UNH team is presently working to secure a suitable outcome.

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 expires 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. In 2017, the parties continued extensive discussions relative to the Omnibus Agreement, and in particular roadways and policing, and finalized a long-term Jackson's Landing Agreement. Conversations continue into 2018.

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. Under the leadership of Director Rachel Gasowski, we've seen interest and participation in Parks & Recreation programming flourish.

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. 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. The updated traffic model, due in January 2018, will prove useful as we work to further improve all forms of transportation locally, both on and off campus.

As a result of new development over the last few years, sidewalk sections along Church Hill and Madbury Road were widened, and the pocket park at Main Street and Mill Road was completely refurbished as part of the Pauly's Pockets project. The pocket park at the corner of Main Street and Pettee Brook Lane was also refurbished with

excellent results, furthering our efforts to make downtown pedestrian welcoming. The Madbury Commons project at 17-21 Madbury Road now provides an attractive pedestrian connection between Madbury Road and Pettee Brook Lane (and Main Street beyond). All of this, combined with increased residential density within the downtown core, has contributed in 2017 to a more vibrant downtown environment attracting an ever increasing mix of new international restaurants and businesses to serve both the full time residential and college student populations that call Durham home.

Significant development projects were discussed by our land use boards in 2017 including a proposal from Riverwoods for a site on Stone Quarry Drive, a 55+ redevelopment on Young Drive, a significant redevelopment at the Mill Plaza, and a refurbishment/redevelopment of the Town & Campus block on Main Street. The Young Drive project did not receive variances necessary for it to move forward in large part due to neighborhood opposition. The Riverwoods (for which a long-term “Payment in Lieu of Taxes” or PILOT was negotiated), Mill Plaza, and Town & Campus projects all move forward into 2018 for further review.

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 helpful to note that Town Councilors Kenny Rotner and Allan Howland are also members of the ORCSD School Board, in this way ensuring there is good communication between Durham and the ORCSD School Board as well relative to issues of mutual interest.

The Town Council voted unanimously on April 3, 2017 to extend my employment contract as Administrator for an additional 9-year term through December 31, 2025. Now in my 17th year of service to the community, I’m looking forward to the next 9 years in Durham.

Durham is highly regarded as a leader in myriad areas amongst NH municipalities, state agencies, and beyond. For example:

- Durham Public Works is working with the NH Department of Environmental Services and UNH researchers on groundbreaking approaches to shoreline restoration using a living shoreline at Wagon Hill Farm;
- The Council endorsed the Energize 360 Seacoast NH Program in an effort to promote sustainable and renewable energy use in Durham and across the Seacoast;
- Durham endorsed the formation of a multi-state task force to explore the potential for offshore wind development along the Maine and NH coastline;
- The Council passed a resolution urging the NH Legislature to oppose Senate Bill 3, an act modifying the definition of domicile for voting purposes as well as the requirements for documenting the domicile of a person registering to vote, believing the bill would result in the disenfranchisement of voters;
- Durham became NH’s first Bee City USA in February 2017;

- Our 640 kW DC Oyster River Solar Array in the Packers Falls Gravel Pit is the 2nd largest such array in NH. Consequently, we are viewed as a regional expert in solar and receive numerous calls for guidance from other NH and ME communities.
- We again received the top ranking score in NH by the Human Rights Campaign's Municipal Equity Index relative to addressing GLBT-Q concerns;
- Durham was listed as the #1 safest college town in America according to SafeWise, a website and blog focusing on safety and security concerns. In 2016 we were listed as the #4 safest college town.

These accomplishments were not by accident. The residents who live here 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, 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. And our Town employees — public works, police, fire, planning, zoning, and more — they 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 is growing, the Town is beautiful, and a positive sense of community is pervasive.

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