

Year End Wrap Up for 2014

Durham, NH

Todd I. Selig, Administrator

12/30/14

The Town of Durham continues to be economically and prudently operated. We function as a purveyor of public services, and staff is working to implement business practices to control costs and maintain the municipality's fiscal position despite many competing pressures ranging from intense development activity to moving ahead with long-deferred capital needs. From preserving the quality of life within our traditional residential neighborhoods to taking steps to address the potential impacts of climate change, we have worked diligently on behalf of the community.

The Town's weekly "Friday Updates" serves to keep the Town Council and members of the community informed of news and happenings in Durham. Over 3,000 people subscribe to this weekly broadcast. Durham has also bolstered its Twitter and Facebook presence this year in order to meet the demands of residents' changing preferences for information distribution. For example, over 425 individuals have signed up for our Twitter feed. The goal is to keep residents informed of local affairs so they may become involved when issues are of interest to them.

Durham's last Master Plan was written in 2000. The Town commenced an update in 2011 with a citizen engagement process that included a public forum and community survey. A Master Plan Advisory Committee was formed at that time to assist the Planning Board in overseeing the process. Significant headway was made in 2014 with the following ten chapters nearing the point in early 2015 when they will be able to be adopted by the Planning Board: Agricultural Resources, Downtown and Commercial Core, Energy, Historical Resources, Natural Resources, Recreation, Community Character, Housing and Demographics, and Land Use (Existing).

In the area of land conservation, the Town has been working with The Nature Conservancy 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. In addition, the Town has worked with the Southeast Land Trust as part of an effort to conserve the 40 +/- acre Thompson parcel located along Wednesday Hill Road abutting the Durham-UNH Water System pump station on the Lamprey River. Durham, working in concert with our regional land stewardship partners, has applied for grant funding to help offset the cost of these projects. I anticipate discussions regarding these two properties will continue well into 2015.

Over the last year, the Town 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 citizens hope and desire to live. The 2011 Master Plan survey was very clear in pointing out that residents of the community seek balance.

In addition to recently completed conservation projects such as Amber Acres and the Oyster River Forest, Durham has experienced significant development activity between 2012 and 2016, which will serve to provide increased tax base moving forward. We project an additional \$21.5 million in new taxable valuation will come on line in 2015 alone.

After many years of discussion, Durham brought on board a part-time economic development director in FY 2014. Mary Ellen Humphrey from Rochester has settled in nicely and is working to ensure thoughtful economic development continues to move forward that is consistent with the community's values and goals. One area of focus is to assist in filling some of the newly created commercial space that has been built over the last few years in the downtown core.

In September 2012, the Council adopted a new Downtown Tax Increment Finance (TIF) district under the auspices of RSA 162-K:5 to fund improvements such as street lighting, roadway improvements, automated parking kiosks, and structured parking to enhance the economic vitality of the downtown area. With the new development anticipated in 2015 and 2016 within the downtown core, we will see a reserve of funds begin to amass for future use within the district. The Town's other TIF district on Stonequarry Drive, remains completely inactive.

The approved FY 2014 General Fund budget left the 2013 tax rate of \$8.34 unchanged for 2014, providing much needed financial stability for many residents of Durham. For FY 2015, the Council established as a goal to ensure any increase to the municipal portion of the tax rate not exceed the rate of inflation which equaled 1.7%. The Administrator and Town Council were ultimately able to achieve this 2015 budgetary goal with a projected 2015 tax rate of \$8.48. To this end, the FY 2015 budget was adopted by a vote of 8-0 by the Council on December 15, 2014.

In late-2013, the Council approved the acceptance of \$125,000 from the US Department of Justice, Community Oriented Policing Services (COPS), for the purpose of hiring a 20th police officer who is focused on "problem oriented policing." This additional resource enabled the Police Department to address some of the impacts of poorly managed non-owner occupied college student housing within Durham's traditional residential neighborhoods surrounding the downtown core in 2014.

Durham's new 12,187 sq. ft. state of the art Town Hall at 8 Newmarket Road officially opened for business on October 23, 2014. The architect of record was Durham resident Art Guadano of AG Architects, Dover, NH. Hutter Construction was the General Contractor. Durham Public Works handled all site and demolition work. The

project took approximately twelve months to complete. Kudos are extended to Public Works Director Mike Lynch for dedicating significant additional time these last twelve months overseeing the project.

The Town entered into a \$1.7 million Purchase & Sale Agreement (P&S) with Scott Mitchell for the redevelopment of the former Town Office site at 15 Newmarket Road as a pharmacy in March 2013, subject to approval by Durham's local land use boards. The developer ultimately determined in his opinion in 2014 that he could not redevelop the site without the demolition of the former Town Office building so the P&S was not renewed. The Town subsequently developed and issued a new Request for Proposal (RFP) for the adaptive redevelopment of the site making clear the old building would need to remain as part of any new development. The RFP is due in January 2015.

The year saw significant disagreement between the Town and UNH with respect to the future of the UNH Outdoor Pool. After months of acrimonious discussions, the Town Council ultimately endorsed a University proposal to construct a new 14,000 – 16,000 sq. ft. modern pool facility with bathhouse in the location of the historic outdoor pool costing approximately \$4.6 million. UNH will pay for the full capital and ongoing operational cost of the facility. Due to unexpected soil compaction issues with the site, the new pool is scheduled to open for the 2016 swimming season. Construction on the new facility began in November 2014.

The Town and University, through the administrative joint Water, Wastewater, and Stormwater Committee, continue to address a multitude of joint Town/Gown items to include bringing on line the Spruce Hole Well in 2015, focusing tremendous attention in 2013 and 2014 on water quality deficiencies within the Great Bay Estuary such as nitrogen as identified by the NHDES and the EPA, meeting EPA wastewater and stormwater MS-4 mandates, implementing a required NHDES backflow prevention program, water tank refurbishing/painting, and more.

Significant energy has been dedicated in 2014 toward working with the University of New Hampshire as part of a collaborative public/public/private development project in downtown Durham to include numerous potential elements such as the UNH bookstore (in lieu of the present Memorial Union Building location), professional office space, small hotel, retail and restaurant space, and possible affordable faculty housing within the downtown core in the vicinity of 66 Main Street, the former ATO fraternity site. A draft Memorandum of Understanding between Durham and UNH was brought forward for initial Council discussion in December. Look forward to additional discussions around this partnership in 2015.

Durham's vision for our Parks & Recreation Department is that it will offer a wide variety of opportunities and concentrations for any resident of any age wishing to participate in accessible, affordable activities. As part of a new initiative for 2014, Parks & Recreation Director Stefanie Frazee worked collaboratively with Oyster River Cooperative School District faculty/staff to offer a new summer camp experience for 4th-

8th grade children. It was a real success. The program offered a full day of enrichment and recreational activities, including S.T.E.M. and the arts.

In response to the goal of becoming a more pedestrian and bicycle friendly community, the Town endeavored to move forward a Main Street “Complete Streets” pilot initiative this summer that entailed the narrowing of Main Street from two lanes to one, the creation of head in parking along the north side of the roadway, and the addition of a dedicated bicycle lane. The pilot program was rolled out during the summer months and continued until UNH came back into session in the fall. Public sentiment was ultimately very negative regarding the effort so the roadway was restored in large part to the preexisting two-lane configuration but with the addition of a shared lane (or “sharrows”) for bicycles, and improved bicycle-focused intersection configurations for Main Street at Pettee Brook Lane and at Madbury Road.

I worked to remain in communication with Oyster River School District Superintendent of Schools James Morse concerning issues of mutual interest/concern. It is helpful to note that Town Councilor Wayne Burton serves as a representative to the district’s Budget Advisory Committee, in this way ensuring there is some level of communication between Durham and the ORCSD relative to budget issues.

A great deal of work has been devoted to addressing human resource issues in Durham in 2014. Collective bargaining contract negotiations took place and were ultimately resolved following 30 months of discussions with the Durham Professional Firefighters Association representing the Town’s firefighters. In addition, a tentative agreement was reached in late-2014 with the Durham Municipal Manager’s Association representing a number of the Town’s administrative assistants, division supervisors, as well as several professional salaried staff positions. A common theme in these discussions revolved around increasing employee contributions toward health insurance and gaining the ability to better utilize existing staffing to cut down on recurring overtime costs.

I am pleased to report that in addition to the many tangible efforts noted in this report, Durham received numerous accolades in the last year that include:

- The No. 1 town in N.H. for young families by NerdWallet.com, a personal finance website.
- The fifth most exciting place in the state by Movoto, a real estate brokerage based in California.
- The No. 1 town in the state for population and job growth from 2010 to 2012 by Nerdwallet.com
- The second safest community in the state by Safe Choice Security, a national provider of security systems.
- The No. 2 place to live for “20-somethings” in the country by CNNMoney.
- The top community for equal treatment for the LGBT community by the Human Rights Campaign.

- Oyster River High School ranked in the top 1 percent of more than 14,000 schools evaluated by Newsweek.
- A great place for the young at heart by the Boston Globe.

I do not believe it is an accident that Durham is so highly regarded. 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. The Town is blessed with amazing 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. The University of New Hampshire also provides social, cultural, and athletic opportunities for the community, not to mention it's an economic driver for 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 citizens who have high expectations for exceptional service delivery at the local level. While taxes are undeniably high in Durham, for all of these reasons, home sales are strong, commercial investment is active, the tax base is growing, and the positive sense of community is pervasive.