

Town of Durham  
Year End Wrap Up for 2019

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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 exploring new ways to address solid waste and recycling amidst market headwinds, to striving to be sustainable on numerous fronts, many individuals have collectively worked diligently on behalf of the community in 2019.

Moody's Investors Services reported on Nov. 5, 2019 that the credit position for Durham is very good. Its Aa2 rating is slightly higher than the median rating of Aa3 for cities nationwide. The notable credit factors include a strong financial position, a very strong wealth and income profile, and a modestly sized tax base. The Town has a strong financial position, which is relatively favorable in comparison to Durham's assigned rating of Aa2. The Town's cash balance as a percent of operating revenues (88.4%) far exceeds the US median and it remained stable between 2014 and 2018. Additionally, Durham's fund balance as a percent of its operating revenues (30.3%) is consistent with that of other Moody's-rated cities nationwide. These indices are all indicative of measured success in realizing the Town's fiscal goals.

The Town Council's goals in 2019 envisioned developing a General Fund budget for FY 2020 that would keep the local municipal portion of the tax rate unchanged at \$7.60. The tax rate had previously remained at \$7.37 for 2015, 2016, 2017, and 2018. Through a very deliberative budget process this ultimately proved infeasible as a result of little new revenue or additional taxable value coming on line. Yet even so, the Council, working with staff, was able to bring the projected 2020 budget in at an increase of 19 cents or 2.5%. This change is estimated to cost the average Durham property taxpayer with a home valued at \$350,000 an additional \$66.50 in Town taxes per year.

Our weekly "Friday Updates" continues to keep the Town Council and members of the community informed of news and happenings in Durham. Nearly 3,300 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/importance to them.

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. 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 ORCSD and the Durham have remained in close contact throughout the design process for the proposed new middle school project/bond issue, which the voters will take up at the polls in March 2020. Collaboration has included the Durham Energy Committee in suggesting strategies to make the proposed new facility as green as feasible, as well as partnership with public safety staff concerning traffic patterns, bicycle routes, and pedestrian walkways around the proposed facility.

Durham again received the top ranking score in NH by the Human Rights Campaign's Municipal Equity Index relative to addressing GLBT-Q concerns. We sponsored programming celebrating Indigenous Peoples' Day in 2019. The Town Council and its appointed Winter Celebration Committee endeavored to thoughtfully address the issue of the annual Tree Lighting in Memorial Park, renamed Frost Fest in 2019, which sparked a wider conversation about inclusivity within the context of the Town's annual celebration. Finally, new welcoming roadway signage was installed at the various entrances to Durham in 2019 with the statement, "A Welcoming Community."

Indeed, we are a community that truly welcomes and encourages citizen involvement/engagement, and visitors from the around the world continue to 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.

Due in large part to the efforts of long-time Durham resident (and retired UNH Professor) Dennis Meadows and a number of other dedicated volunteers, as well as closely coordinated efforts between the Town and the ORCSD, we've just closed on a 40-acre parcel along the Oyster River (utilizing private donations). We hope to successfully raise additional funds through grants and private donations which will allow us to build a small pedestrian bridge spanning the river, directly linking downtown Durham, our Faculty Neighborhood, and the UNH core campus to 2,000 acres of

conservation land – creating an easily accessible future natural oasis for residents on future hot 100 + degree days resulting from the anticipated impacts of climate change.

Projected sea level rise will contribute in the years ahead to the gradual inundation of coastal areas. We're already seeing it -- and are responding locally. Interested Durham residents were given the opportunity to join other volunteers in late-July of this year for a day of planting a brand new living shoreline at the Town's Wagon Hill Farm. Completed last month, we now have 350 feet of shoreline restored, re-graded, armored with natural hard and soft-scape materials, and planted to restore the salt marsh and tidal buffer that has eroded over time. It's a project that has taken 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. We believe it will become a regional demonstration project for living shorelines, and an additional \$213,765 (budgeted in the 2020 CIP from Eversource) is now targeted for 2020/21 utilizing monies negotiated with Eversource, along with what we hope will be a second round of Aquatic Resource Mitigation (or ARM) funding to extend the shoreline stabilization farther along the property boundary.

Durham is working with the Strafford Regional Planning Commission utilizing NHDES funding to study the potential impact of sea level rise on fresh water private wells within the community. It's an interesting initiative focusing on an issue that, until now, has literally been out of site and out of mind.

Since 2012, Durham has been successful in moving forward a municipal construction program to replace/renovate aged public infrastructure resulting in a new state of the art public library, newly renovated police station, ongoing improvements to our water and wastewater systems, and a new Town Hall receiving LEED Silver certification. **The Oyster River Cooperative School District is proposing a state of the art new middle school along Coe Drive for the voters to consider in March 2020. Meanwhile the Town Council has approved incremental enhancements to the Churchill Rink, which will enable that facility to serve the community more effectively and efficiently into the future.** Our philosophy is that if we want local developers, private citizens and businesses to meet new construction standards that provide adaptation and resilience, Durham has to set the example.

As of this fall, a newly installed backup generator at the Town Hall now means that all of our public buildings and critical infrastructure are able to operate on emergency backup generation during power outages.

Over the years, Durham has replaced all of its roadside and decorative street lighting with energy efficient LED fixtures. We've installed, under an umbrella power purchase agreement (or PPA), 120 kW of solar capacity at our police station, the public library, and Churchill Rink. This was followed up with a 640 kW solar array at our gravel pit in Lee, NH. Together, these efforts have allowed Durham to offset 100% of the

electric demand of all municipal infrastructure with renewable power with the exception of our wastewater treatment plant. We hope to find a green solution for powering the WWTP in the years to come as technology continues to evolve and opportunities present themselves.

Crosswalk improvements, pedestrian pathway modifications, incentivizing new downtown mixed-use development within walkable proximity to the UNH campus, painstaking traffic planning, demand management parking enhancements, bicycle infrastructure, and a system of sharrows all make it possible to get around Durham and the UNH campus more safely, easily, and resiliently while lowering our carbon footprint. We're currently evaluating the introduction of micromobility devices (e-bikes/e-scooters) and determining what policies will be needed to manage such a program safely and effectively.

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. A new \$20 million Water Treatment Plant on the UNH campus is nearing completion, which will deploy state of the art technology – replacing an aged/outdated facility, for the benefit of UNH and Durham water users alike.

On an extremely creative note, the Town partnered in 2019 with the Strafford Regional Planning Commission, UNH Cooperative Extension, and Northeastern University Art Professor Tom Starr on a grant-funded project that conveys the potential impacts of climate change on the collective Durham community looking ahead into the next 100 years. We've identified strategic locations around town to highlight, have developed a description, map, and signage featuring an innovation or impact associated with climate change that is not only plausible, but likely to occur at the identified location if actions are not taken today to achieve a different collective tomorrow.

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. 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.

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, 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 (a draft Total Nitrogen General Permit will be issued by EPA in early January 2020), maintaining 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.

On this note, we have developed cooperative and collaborative efforts with UNH to enhance the mutual intellectual, cultural, environmental, social, and economic benefits associated with hosting New Hampshire's flagship state university, including redevelopment of 66 Main St., Hetzel/Alexander Halls, and the creation of a West Edge Innovation District. Town and gown continue to communicate and work toward the redevelopment of 66 Main St. (commercial/office/residential/public space – likely 2020/2021) and the Hetzel/Alexander site (hotel – a potential 2021/2022 project). Following many months of review by USNH Board of Trustees/UNH/developer, a delegation from UNH/Town will be traveling to meet with Elliott Sidewalk Communities in late-January 2020.

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. The new recreation van has also opened up new possibilities such as senior trips to regional museums, etc.

While taxes are undeniably high in Durham, home sales remain strong, commercial investment is active, downtown vacancies are almost non-existent, the tax base continues to grow (albeit more slowly than we would ideally like), the Town is beautiful, and a positive sense of community is pervasive.

In closing, I would like to note that our Town employees within public works, police, fire, planning, zoning, town clerk/tax collector's Office, IT, DCAT, and more — are terrific 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 indispensably active involvement by dedicated citizens on local boards, committees, and commissions, all contributes to ensuring Durham remains a strong, vibrant, and welcoming community.

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