



## **Town Administrator's Report to Selectboard**

**June 18, 2021**

### **COVID 19 Update**

As you may be aware for the first time since we have been tracking COVID 19 cases the data for June 9 through June 15 reported no new “confirmed” or “suspected” case of the virus in South Hadley.

We have posted on our website Governor Baker's latest situational report on the pandemic. It states with the lifting of restrictions and the end of the State of Emergency the command center will cease operation and those reports will no longer be issued twice a month.

Without political bias or affiliation, I commend the Governor for his steady hand and sensible guidance during this national crisis. I fully realize there are an array of opinions held about his, the Commonwealth's and our local performance. I would just say it much easier to ride the bus than drive it. Critique of these past sixteen or so months will be a subject will continue for decades, and rightfully so, as we always hope to do better. However, I would suggest seeking a deeper understanding of the complexities of this national tragedy before using media, social or professional as a foundation for your argument.

Locally I would like to thank the Selectboard and the Health Department for their leadership and guidance as we hopefully are exiting this tunnel of despair. Over one thousand residents were confirmed case, more than fifty lives were lost since March 2020 in South Hadley. My condolences to the families of those lives lost and hope for full recovery all those stricken.

There were several groups who should be saluted including first responders from the Police, Dispatchers and both Fire Districts who ignored the unknown dangers, especially at the beginning of the pandemic and came to work, some even contracted the virus, likely from doing their job. The Health Department, including Jennifer Jernigan, Marge Bernard and Monasia Caesar who have performed extraordinarily well, while continuing to do their “regular” work, they took on tracing, researching best practices, offering guidance to businesses and citizens and more, thank you.

It goes without saying South Hadley's Health Director/Emergency Management Director Sharon Hart was a superhero in this fight against the invisible enemy. Her steady guidance and her calm demeanor guided us through a labyrinth of the unknown. Thank you, Sharon, thank you all!

As we start to ramp up and reopen, we will continue to seek to retain skills and lessons learned from the pandemic. Including how we can improve the use of technologies to increase public participation, make our service models more efficient and be better prepared for the next crisis.

We are starting to rehire a few of the positions we left unfilled during these past sixteen months, particularly in key departments to allow opening to the public to be a success. Those openings are on the town website.

Presently you can request any department to arrange an in-person meeting by appointment and starting July 6<sup>th</sup> select offices which provide the bulk of direct customer interaction will be available Tuesday, Wednesday, and Thursday from 10 AM to 2 PM (Collector, Assessor, Clerk, Building, Recreation).

Town Hall will continue to offer phone, email, on-line services, drop off and good old reliable USPS. If necessary and when possible, we will continue to offer curbside and delivery to your home.

The Transfer Station will continue to operate five days a week (as opposed to the previous two days a week) by appointment through the on-line scheduling system. The common misnomer is that the pandemic was the main driver for this change, the reality is the scheduling was to add much needed controls as significant changes and cost associated with trash and recycling spiraled in 2019 and 2020. Due to these measures South Hadley has been able to be cost effective and avoid getting out of the trash business altogether like so many of our neighboring communities. Those communities have burdened their citizenry with required private contractor fees and other additional costs much higher than South Hadley.

All these policies and services are under continuous review and will evolve. We appreciate your patience, constructive input, cooperation and understanding, as we try to provide cost effective and reliable service for the whole of South Hadley.

Please consult the DPW webpage for more details on the Transfer Station and hours of operation. It also should be noted there is still continually updated information on the COVID 19 page including vaccine opportunities. Vaccines are presently the most beneficial way we can help the community return to normal, we encourage everyone to consider it as an option for the family and friends.

## **Annual Town Meeting**



No this is not a picture of a 1930's revival, a horse auction nor has the circus come to town. It is hopefully the last of the "drive-in Town Meetings" for South Hadley. I would like to thank Pastor Twohig for allowing us to use the parking lot at St Theresa's for this event.

I would also like to thank everyone who participated and volunteered to facilitate this annual event. Each and every person I believe were vested in making this an effective and time-honored event to do the business of the Town of South Hadley.

There were some parts which did not go as expected, from the tabulators to the lawn sprinklers there were some frustrating and at times comical moments. I suspect we will be able to work out some of the quirks in the tabulators given so many other communities have successfully used the devices to enhance their Town Meeting experience.

At the conclusion of the meeting, the business at hand was completed, and the required articles were voted on. There were topics debated which will form future Town Meetings and community conversations and that is likely the most important and productive purpose of this gathering. There are few opportunities left where a community can look itself in the mirror and decide what is needed to make improvements collectively like a New England style Town Meeting.

## **Planning Director Transition**

Congratulations to the Planning Board, especially to Chair Hutchison on their recent decision to have Anne Capra become the next South Hadley Planning Director by unanimous vote. The board struggled, but ultimately through the leadership of the Chair and Vice Chair they made a decision. To many others this presented an incredible and obvious opportunity to replace a very talented and respected director with a person who is equal to the task.

Having witnessed this transition plan unfold, I would suggest it should serve a model for the future transitions. Richard Harris served South Hadley well and should be exceedingly proud of his legacy. Anne Capra brings a fresh perspective with a deep understanding of the town and its needs and will be, I predict her talents and vision is exactly what SoHa needs to guide its adaptation to rapidly changing community.

Please join me in congratulating Anne on here appointment and wish Richard all the best in his retirement, the mountains await!

## **Open Meeting Law Legislation**

The legislature recently adopted a law which will allow cities and towns to continue remote participation under rules similar if not identical to those allowed during the pandemic. Each

board/committee chair have been sent via email a copy of the opinion from Town Counsel regarding the legislation.

We are continuing to work towards facilitating in-person meetings in a safe and effective manner. There is probably no time in our history where direct human interaction in a civil setting has been needed more. However, we have witnessed the importance of making government more accessible by way of technology and will continue to consider how we can harness the experience in a positive manner.

It is my belief South Hadley needs to consider whether Town Hall can any longer be effective to host public meetings. It is building which lacks in a profound way “accessibility”, the safety and security of the building is suspect at best, it lacks parking for large meetings and remains somewhat unfamiliar to a large portion of the population.

I would suggest serious consideration be given to creating a plan to fully utilize and centralize public body meetings at the Library and Senior Center going forward. Expanding the use of school space in non-school hours should be explored as well.

This should include consideration being given to Town Meeting being held at either the Senior Center or at a suitable space at one of the schools in the future. Given the substantial taxpayer investment in the Senior Center and the Library (and schools) it only makes sense to consider them as a viable option to hold public meetings, if for no other reason than being more accessible and suitable.

### **School Superintendent Dr. Jamal Mosely**

It was my pleasure to meet recent with Dr Mosely as he takes over control of the South Hadley Schools as superintendent. I appreciate his taking the opportunity from a busy schedule what I suspect is heavy, heavy load of issues to stop by for a visit.

South Hadley Schools have a lot going for them; they did not skip a beat with the interim Superintendent Dr. Diana Bonneville during some extraordinarily trying times. Yes, like every district there was changes and decisions which were called into question, but both the interim and the School Committee were committed to making decisions which provided better education and opportunity for all in a safe environment. Thank you, Dr. Bonneville, the School Committee and everyone who serves the district.

In our conversation, Dr Mosely certainly expressed a depth of knowledge and commitment to lead the district. We had a good discussion which really spoke to his professional appreciation and need for ESL and SPED and the expanding demand for those services every district. His urban and suburban experiential learning will serve South Hadley very well, I wish him great success.

## **Lithia Springs Enforcement**

Please be aware the South Hadley Police Department at the behest of Administration has adopted a policy of strict enforcement of the parking and **towing** regulations on Lithia Springs Road. The situation and blatant disregard of the “No Parking” signs, along with the signs being toppled over by vandals (they have been put back up) has forced these measures to become more focused. We would remind people the town worked with District #2 Water to create a parking lot along Route 116 (“Hiker’s Parking”) and we encourage people to utilize the area for parking.

The Town met with the Regional Director and the DCR Commissioner this week to discuss how we may develop a cooperative plan which will make access to the Lithia Springs Reservoir (DCR) more easily accessible for hikers. The plan once developed more fully will be the subject of more public discussion which the residents of the area and those who use recreate in the area are asked to submit their ideas, as well.

We have heard from some residents they feel the parking area is too far from Lithia Springs. It would seem to me saying the parking lot is too far to walk to go on hike is a little if not a lot duplicitous.... just saying.

We will be reaching out to more of the partners to get their impressions as to how we can bring more controls to protect the private interests of the neighbors, but also have this public land accessible to all parties. It is a balancing act, as you can imagine.

## **Flag Retirement Box**



Veteran Service Officer Mike Slater has been working with various groups and sponsors to rehab our previous “ballot drop box” to be used as a drop box for flags to be retired. The box was replaced with a more secure one prior to the last election, making this box available for this purpose.

The drop off is just outside Town Hall on the PD side of the building. We encourage all citizens to drop off their tattered American flags so they can be respectfully and properly disposed of by the Veteran Service Officer and his group of volunteers.

Respectfully submitted,

Michael J. Sullivan

Town Administrator, South Hadley