

Andrea Miles, Chair
Jeff Cyr, Vice-Chair
Christopher Geraghty, Clerk
Sarah Etelman
Bruce Forcier

Michael J. Sullivan
Town Administrator

January 17, 2020

Honorable Selectboard,

Please accept this report as an abridged accounting of the activities and initiatives I and others have been engaged in on your behalf. As you are aware we are in a very busy cycle with preparation for the next fiscal year, monitoring the close of this fiscal year, elections, and so many exciting programs and projects. I am especially thankful for your support and patience.

Expanded and Improved Selectboard Meeting Room: There are few bugs being worked out of the new digs in respect to the renovations. But most people are very happy with the changes. This is especially true of the larger committees like the ConsCom.

There are about a dozen less seats in the audience. However, I have had several individuals comment on the improved comfort of the new chairs. We did look at adding some new seats, but to avoid unnecessary costs we will augment the capacity when needed with the folding seats from the auditorium. As you are aware there is only occasional need for overflow seating at public meetings.

Thank you to all those involved in this upgrade and to the Selectboard and Town Meeting for supporting continuous improvements to the public spaces in town hall.

MPIC Department Meetings: This past week we had a half a dozen meetings with small groups of managers, Master Plan Implementation Committee Chair Judy Gooch and Vice Chair Nate Therrien. I would like to say South Hadley is very lucky to have these two very talented individuals volunteering. If they were paid consultants we would likely not be able afford this level of knowledge.

The meetings were to ensure every department was familiar with the Master Plan Update exercise, and as the plan is presently in draft form give the managers an opportunity to offer input into the updated plan. I also set up an additional meeting with some key individuals from town hall who are not necessarily “managers” but are critical to our success on so many levels. This group includes Kristin Maher (Executive Assistant to Administration), Jamie Doolittle (IT Coordinator), Matt Cowie (Facilities/Safety Coordinator) and Michelle Parent (HR Specialist). As suspected their input was of great value.

One of the common themes throughout the meetings was how we can improve communications. There were a number of interesting ideas like SHED Talks (South Hadley Educational Demonstrations) which would be a series of “How To” videos - from how do I sign up for Civic Ready to how does my property get valued to what happens to my recycling? There was great excitement about this project and we hope to start moving on the idea rather quickly.

A point which was brought up by DTA Jennifer Wolowicz was about how we attract and retain high quality and diverse employees to South Hadley. This spurred conversation in almost every subsequent group. I agree there is a critical importance to what the Master Plan says about who is serving the citizenry in a public capacity. Chairperson Gooch stated she would be bringing that back to the large group to discuss.

It also was a great opportunity for the Chair and Vice Chair of MPIC to hear about what interesting and multifarious work is done throughout the municipal complex. I have one more meeting scheduled for next week and MPIC will have met with all the departments. The managers have been asked to respond to the "Update Questionnaire" by next week with their comments and suggestions

Hampshire Health Insurance Trust: The good news for communities who are part of HHIT is the Executive Committee voted to recommend to the Insurance Advisory Committee a zero percent (0%) increase to the premiums. As an Executive Committee member I enthusiastically voted in favor of this, not solely for the fact that it will make budgeting for FY21 easier in SoHa, but for a number of other reasons.

Before I get into those other reasons I should say the downside of this positive message is to have a zero percent increase we may need to use as much as three million (\$3 million) dollars of the Trust reserve.

So back to the next reason - the Trust has healthy reserves (\$24 million), approximately seven million above the industry standard for a trust of this size. We also recently went through a painful change in the plan, I am sure you recall, which upset some unions. The Hampshire Health Insurance Trust remains one of the most affordable and attractive health plans in Massachusetts.

BC/BS recommended a traditionally high increase of 7% which would be devastating to local budgets. Last year we voted to risk \$1.5 million to offset risks. We did not have to use any, and in reality due to a strong investment market (nearly \$3 million in returns) the cost was neutral. The fund actually grew. I am very hopeful the IAC will vote in favor of this course of action on Jan. 22, as any increase will make local budgets suffer.

Land of Low Value/Owner Unknown: I recently met Treasurer/Collector Donna Whitely, Assistant Assessor Melissa Rimbold, Planning Director Richard Harris, and Associate Planner Anne Capra to review both the short list of "Owner Unknown parcels" and the longer list of "Land of Low Value."

Lands of low value are parcels of land which are scattered about the town which at one point in time were owned by someone or some entity. These usually non-buildable lots are often remnants from defunct developers or LLCs, estates, or parcels not held in common by adjacent property owners. They all owe taxes but their worth and outstanding tax debt is often greater than any value we may receive at the end of the process of acquiring. There is a multi-faceted process of acquiring the property which I will be happy to explain as soon as I understand it completely.

Our strategy for this project will be to identify two categories of properties which have value to us (the town) from both these two groups and from tax title properties (which is a whole other subject). This would be properties adjacent to sensitive habitats, wetlands or parcels which would complement other municipally-held properties. The other category which I particularly like is properties which may have

some development potential and would make sense to get back on the tax rolls as revenue-generating properties. It may be one of the only ways we see growth if the economy tanks, so I would encourage us to move toward that now as opposed to later.

School Superintendent Meeting: Town Accountant William Sutton and I recently met with Interim Superintendent Dr. Diana Bonneville and School Department Business Manager Jennifer Morrison. I can say without equivocation no one should doubt the resolve of these two individuals to find a workable solution to some of the challenges which face the South Hadley School Department in respect to the tough decisions ahead.

Like so many budget issues there are no easy answers. I let Dr. Bonneville know that my expectation is to recommend a budget which will include two thirds of all new revenue (approximately \$400K) to go directly to the schools, but also other costs such as increased Unemployment Insurance, Workman's Comp, and increased Out-Going Tuition - all related to the schools but not reflected in their budget will be increasing significantly.

The meeting was very reassuring for me in respect to the fact we all are trying to make this work. Each of us have tough decisions to make and the least productive and appropriate way to make those things happen would be to start pointing fingers. I also discussed that the municipal side of the budget would be picking up the full cost of School Resource Officers in the PD budget this year.

I appreciate Dr. Bonneville's openness and honesty about what the schools are facing and I can honestly say if there was more money to afford the schools in a responsible way without impacting other services I would be recommending we do so without hesitation.

Greenfield Coop Opening: Thank you to Selectboard members Bruce Forcier and Sarah Etelman for attending the ribbon cutting ceremonies for Northampton Cooperative Savings on Newton Street.

Welcome to South Hadley, NoHo Co-op, including President Mike Tucker, Manager Courtney Huxley and all the staff. Thank you for the investment in South Hadley!

Respectfully submitted,

Michael J. Sullivan
Town Administrator,
South Hadley

