

Town of Durham
Year End Wrap Up for 2024

Todd Selig, Administrator

12/31/24

2024 was another solid year for the Town of Durham. Town staff, as well as Elected and appointed officials, worked diligently to address the community's needs and maintain transparency, integrity, respect for one another, a welcoming atmosphere, free and fair elections, a high quality of life for residents, outstanding service delivery, and improvement in sustainable practices across the organization. Despite competing pressures, we also managed to maintain the municipality's fiscal position and ensure long-term resilience for the community.

Our Independent Auditor's most recent year-end audit (FY 2023) prepared by Plodzick and Sanderson indicates strong financial health with no adverse findings. Moody's Investors Services indicates that the credit position for Durham is very high quality. Our Aa2 bond rating is a little stronger than the US cities median of Aa3. The Town's unassigned fund balance of the General Fund has increased to \$7,757,790, which is at long last after more than twenty years of effort, in line with Town goals and industry best practices. These metrics are all indicative of measured success in realizing the Town's fiscal goals.

After holding the municipal portion of the tax rate unchanged for the last two years, the FY 2025 general fund budget, which was approved by the Town Council on December 16, is projected to keep the local portion of the rate in line with the rate of inflation for the Boston-Cambridge-Newton-MA-NH region at 3.4%. Due to a development boom in the early 2010's, we held the municipal tax rate constant for 2015, 2016, 2017 and 2018 despite significant capital investment in municipal infrastructure (i.e., new Library, new Town Hall, and renovation/addition to the Police Department). Unfortunately, there is no significant new development on the near-term horizon to broaden the tax base and offset the cost of local services. This should be an area of focus for 2025 as the cost of providing municipal services will continue to grow.

The Town Council approved moving forward with Phase III of the Madbury Road Complete Streets Project as part of the FY 2025 capital budget, which at full buildout will reconstruct the 8,200 lineal foot Madbury Road corridor, connecting Main Street to Route 4 utilizing a "complete streets" framework. The Town was successful in obtaining substantial American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA) funding totaling over \$608,000 to address culvert and drainage improvements associated with the project and we continue to pursue external funding for project components.

The Town Council adopted several notable resolutions in 2024:

- Res. #2024-02 recognizing Assessor Jim Rice upon his retirement following 11 years of service.
- Res. #2024-04 accepting \$286,600 in grant funds from LCHIP to support the rehabilitation of the Bickford-Chesley House at Wagon Hill Farm.
- Res. #2024-05 recognizing Michael Everngam for his many years of dedicated volunteer service to the Town of Durham since 1994.
- Res. #2024-06 opposing House Bill 1281, which sought to prohibit a zoning ordinance or regulation from restricting the number of occupants in a residential rental property to less than 2 occupants per bedroom.
- Res. #2024-07 renewing the employment contract with Administrator Todd I. Selig for an additional 7 seven years through 12/31/30.
- Res. #2024-09 recognizing those whose steadfast efforts resulted in the historic 1974 Town vote to prohibit construction of an oil refinery along the shore of Great Bay on the 50th anniversary of the event.
- Res. #2024-10 acknowledging the impact of the Israel-Hamas conflict on resident of the Town, affirming the Town’s stance against hate, bigotry, and discrimination, and calling for an immediate ceasefire, the safe release of all hostages, the provision of humanitarian aid to civilians in Gaza, and a durable bilateral ceasefire among the parties to the Israel-Hamas conflict.
- Res. 2024-12 accepting \$1,994,539 in grant funding from the National Fish and Wildlife Foundation for shoreline restoration work at Wagon Hill Farm.
- Res. 2024-14 accepting up to \$2,040,000 in funding from the US EPA for the Bennett Road Stormwater and Flood Resiliency Project.
- Res. 2024-15 affirming Juneteenth Independence Day as a recognized holiday in Durham and reaffirming the Town’s opposition to oppression.
- Res. 2024-17 expressing Durham’s interest in partnering with UNH to ensure that the constitutional right to freedom of speech for residents and visitors remains unimpeded and to emphasize de-escalation in all conflicts.
- Res. 2024-23 recognizing Durham Fire and DPW for their quick response to the Town Hall major water leak, and recognizing employees in the Planning, Zoning, Assessing, Business, IT, and Town Clerk/Tax Collector’s Office for their patience and flexibility during the clean-up and subsequent rehabilitation efforts.

Durham’s weekly “Friday Updates” continue to keep the Town Council and members of the community informed of news and happenings in Durham. Nearly 4,300 individuals (up 600 from last year alone) subscribe to this weekly publication, which doubles as a part of our local emergency broadcast system. The goal is to keep residents informed of local affairs so they may become engaged when issues are of

interest/importance to them. Durham also continues to utilize its web site, Twitter (X), and Facebook presence in order to meet the demands of residents' varying preferences for information distribution. A complete refresh of the Town's web site is planned in 2025.

Years of planning paid off in late 2023 when Durham representatives went to the State House to receive a Land and Community Heritage Investment Program (LCHIP) award from Gov. Chris Sununu. The \$286,000 grant is intended to help pay for rehabilitation of the historic Bickford-Chesley House at Wagon Hill Farm. Local resident historians Carolyn Singer, Janet Mackie, Nancy Sandberg, and Charlotte Hitchcock have been working diligently with Public Works Director Rich Reine to plan for improvements to the building since that time, navigating market-driven cost increases and project complications with the historic structure. Exterior and interior restoration and renovation are needed to return the building to a fully usable condition including ADA accessibility. The improvements will accommodate the building's adaptive reuse, which with supplemental funding totaling \$1,173,425 allocated by the Council as part of the FY 2025 budget process, will ultimately create a caretaker's apartment on the second floor and public uses including an exhibit gallery and meeting rooms on the first floor, as well as allowing for three-season use of the barn, which is currently unusable for anything but dry storage due to code requirements. The Bickford-Chesley House Gallery will house temporary exhibits on Durham's history as well as the work of local artists. Wagon Hill Farm is on land originally occupied by the Indigenous Abenaki, and it became one of the first farms in the area to be settled by English colonists. It remained in continuous agricultural use for nearly 300 years. In addition to the LCHIP grant, the Town has received a Moose Plate Grant in the amount of \$20,000 for a total of \$306,600 in external capital funding. Work on the Bickford-Chesley House is expected to begin in late Spring 2025.

Durham received a top-ranking score in NH by the Human Rights Campaign's Municipal Equity Index (MEI) in 2024 relative to addressing LGBTQ inclusive practices – 93 out of 100 points.

As part of the 2021 budget, the Council approved \$1,385,000 to replace Durham's public safety Land and Mobile Radio (LMR) communication infrastructure because it exceeded its scheduled end of life. We were subsequently notified by the US Department of Justice in 2022 that \$900,000 was awarded to Durham under the COPS Technology and Equipment Program to offset the cost of the project. After substantial planning and numerous delays outside of the Town's control, the LMR project became fully operational in 2024.

Staffing headwinds impacted our fire and police departments this year. Several employees, after many years of dedicated service, chose to move on, some through

retirement and others in pursuit of different job opportunities or vocations, and we have struggled to attract new prospects. There were long-term medical issues/injuries at the Fire Department driving up overtime costs. Increased competition for fire/police personnel across NH emerged providing alternatives for staff in terms of where to work for increasingly competitive pay. Fewer people across society appear to be moving into emergency service professions, making it harder to fill vacancies. In response, we made several adjustments within the existing firefighters' contract to address the issue of compensation as a stopgap measure, yet formal collective bargaining contract negotiations will commence in 2025. A new contract for Durham's police officers was negotiated and ratified in 2024, which we believe will allow the Town to compete in current market conditions. The topic of compensation will demand additional focus in 2025 as three collective bargaining agreements are set to expire – fire, middle managers, and public works.

The team at the fire department has submitted a grant application totaling \$562,120.00 for replacement SCBA equipment that would provide Durham firefighters with the safest available PPE that meets modern standards consisting of a SCBA harness/backpack, face piece, and two cylinders.

The Durham Police Department is certified as part of a professional external accreditation process through the Commission on Accreditation for Law Enforcement Agencies (CALEA). This provides the Town with an assurance that our department is engaged in providing best practices in policing services to citizens as evidenced by ongoing inspections by an outside independent entity. A review by external examiners of 25% of the department's policies took place in July 2024. In 2025, a full CALEA review will occur involving opportunities for public engagement/feedback.

It was a productive year for Durham Parks & Recreation. We estimate that 19.25% of Durham households participated in Parks & Rec. programming in 2024. This calculation does not include community-wide programming undertaken such as: Memorial Day, Frost Fest, Durham Day, Halloween Downtown Trick-or-Treating, Turkey Trot; Durham Day Dash 5K; Trot In the Trees 5K; Sweetheart Skate; Drop In Adult Basketball; Drop in Adult Volleyball; Knitting; Vacation week drop in open gym sessions; and Open Play Pickleball at Woodridge.

Through the efforts of Sara Callaghan, our recently former part-time contract Land Stewardship Coordinator, and the Land Stewardship Subcommittee of the Conservation Commission, the Town continues to make significant inroads in sustainably managing the numerous lands and easements under the Town's stewardship. Sara departed to take a full time position with UNH Cooperative Extension in October and the Town was able to hire Veronique Luddington to take her place in December.

The Town works to maintain a positive and cooperative relationship with the Oyster River School District. With the impending retirement of former School Superintendent James Morse in June, I was asked by the School Board to participate as part of the Superintendent selection process, which resulted in the hiring of Robert Shaps as of July 1, 2024. Superintendent Shaps and I remain in regular communication with one another regarding issues of mutual interest. He will provide the Council with an update on the district's budget process in early-2025.

We completed Durham's first Climate Action Plan (CAP) in 2022, a requirement of the Town's membership with the Global Covenant of Mayors for Climate and Energy. This plan outlines mitigation and adaptation actions, measures how much each action will contribute to Durham meeting its mitigation and adaptation goals, and includes a plan for implementing the identified tasks. It establishes a course of action for local efforts toward a reduction in GHG emissions of 2019 levels by 42.8% by 2030, and achieving zero emissions by 2050. In 2023, our UNH Sustainability Fellow updated a Greenhouse Gas Inventory for Durham utilizing 2021 and 2022 data. In 2024, our Sustainability Fellow has been working to update the Town's CAP for use over the course of the next five years.

The Energy Committee and staff have made numerous strides in local sustainability efforts, in particular shepherding an initiative for the Town to join the Community Power Coalition of New Hampshire (CPCNH) to work toward providing wider accessibility of green energy for our community's residential and business electric utility customers, at a price equal to or less than Eversource, and working to assist Durham residents and business owners make the built environment more energy efficient, thereby reducing overall emissions. As part of this work, Durham officially launched Durham Community Power, offered through CPCNH, in February 2024!

As part of our planned DPW solid waste collection vehicle replacement program in 2024/25, the Town is moving ahead with a volume-based collection system in which each household will be issued a standard size solid waste collection toter for trash and another for recycling. DPW will then accept solid waste, limiting trash materials collected curbside to what can fit within the issued standard-size receptacles, utilizing new collection vehicles equipped with hydraulic arms to grab and dump each container, thereby encouraging less solid waste per household generation, enhancing recycling, and reducing employee exposure to potential lift, poke, and strain injuries. DPW was able to secure external state grant funds to offset 45% of the purchase price of an electric (EV) collection vehicle, which if secured, we understand would be the first EV municipal collection truck in NH.

The Town obtained \$20,000 in grant funds to pay for the cost of a Housing Needs Assessment by RKG Associates dated May 2024. As a college town that is home to

UNH's main campus, the report concludes that Durham has disproportionately higher shares of non-family renter households. With its rental housing market driven by the college student population, we have a relatively expensive housing market, which makes it difficult to develop workforce housing that is affordable for homeowners. Though Durham's recent housing market trends show some positive signs as development interest has been shifting to higher-density residential developments, its housing market has not been delivering new housing that either meets the workforce housing affordability requirement or is affordable to a broader section of the population beyond student renters in recent years. To meet its housing objectives over the next 16 years, the report concludes Durham will have to encourage diverse types of housing, smaller housing, and higher densities to reduce its average development cost. The RKG report concludes that Durham should also consider zoning changes to lower the minimum usable area requirement for Conservation Subdivisions, and to allow multi-unit development in more areas that are deemed suitable for workforce housing development. Following two years of work by numerous boards, the Town Council adopted a new Attainable Housing Overlay District on 12/16/24. Additional initiatives are in process at the present time through the Housing Task Force and Planning Board.

Durham and UNH have been in active conversations concerning future development at The Edge at West End and also at Durham's 66 Main St. parcel. An RFP for a Master Developer for the project was issued by UNH in December 2024. The EDGE Innovation District is envisioned to create a research-based live-work-play community on the UNH Durham Campus. By leveraging 43 acres of available land, The EDGE could become a hub for innovation, technology transfer, and entrepreneurship that capitalizes on UNH's strengths and expands industry collaboration while providing expanded tax base for Durham and potential new customers to support our downtown. If successful, entrepreneurs, researchers, students, and professionals will mingle and collaborate in a lively new district, but with connectivity to downtown Durham.

The Town Council voted on 9/13/21, to award a Final Design Contract to Vanasse Hagen Brustlin, Inc. (VHB) for removal of the Mill Pond Dam. Subsequent to a Town-wide referendum vote on the issue, staff began pursuing external grant funding opportunities to support the cost of dam removal, working with the US Army Corps of Engineers and the NH Division of Historic Resources, as part of a Section 106 historic mitigation review, and planning engineering for the project. The historic mitigation, design, and wetland permitting have all been in process since 2023 with permitting envisioned to be in hand for 2025 with dam removal commencing in 2025, depending upon timing of the various detailed steps involved.

The National Fish and Wildlife Foundation and the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration announced a November 2023 round of funding for National Coastal Resilience Fund projects. \$1.9 million in funding was earmarked to create a

living shoreline to stabilize an additional 1,835 linear feet of tidal shoreline and restore both 4,060 square feet of salt marsh habitat and 2,810 square feet of tidal buffer at Wagon Hill Farm. The project underwent extensive permitting in 2024 and slated to begin in 2025, will stabilize severe erosion while protecting and increasing the adaptive capacity of critical conservation and community spaces. This is a continuation of our living shoreline project at WHF dating back to 2019.

Durham worked closely with the City of Portsmouth in 2024 to ensure Portsmouth's access across Wagon Hill Farm to repair their water line at the shore of Little Bay was undertaken with as little disruption as possible to the property and the quiet enjoyment thereof by our residents. The project was a success.

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 gallons/day of water to both Town and the UNH 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. This, combined with a new state of the art \$20 million Water Treatment Plant on the UNH campus (funded 100% by UNH), places the combined Durham/UNH community in a very sustainable position in the face of anticipated climate change.

Durham and UNH, through the joint administrative Water, Wastewater, Stormwater, and Roads Committee, continue to cooperatively address a multitude of Town/Gown items to include efficient operation of our combined water system as described above, focusing attention on water quality deficiencies within the Great Bay Estuary as identified by the NHDES and the EPA, meeting EPA wastewater and stormwater MS-4 mandates under our EPA Total Nitrogen General Permit, maintaining a required NHDES backflow prevention program, general water/sewer infrastructure, our Lee water line 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 UNH are joined at the hip and work seamlessly together.

We refreshed signage at the train trestle adjacent to the Durham/UNH Train Station this fall. Modeled on advertisements utilized in the London Underground, the Town installed several vertical billboard-type advertising panels years ago intended at the time to combat recurring graffiti in this location. The effort was a success, eliminating the graffiti problem entirely and allowing for several of the Town's then business establishments to advertise their wares, as well as for UNH to promote some of its offerings to travelers. Two decades later, the panels were faded with many of the businesses no longer in operation. As such, over the course of more than a year, the Town and UNH worked together to redesign the panels, moving away from a business

advertising approach to instead focus on positive/interesting attributes of both Durham and UNH. Cost for the effort was shared equally between Durham and UNH.

I wish to acknowledge our modest but mighty team of employees within public works, police, fire, planning, zoning, town clerk/tax collector's office, informational technology, DCAT, and more. These are outstanding people, working hard with finite resources to meet the needs of a demanding citizenry with high expectations for exceptional service delivery. 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 active involvement by dedicated citizens on local boards, committees, and commissions, all contribute to ensuring Durham remains a strong, vibrant, and welcoming community.