



**Shaun A. Suhoski**, Town Manager  
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**MEMORANDUM**

TO: Athol Board of Selectmen  
FR: Shaun A. Suhoski, Town Manager  
RE: Town Manager's Report  
DT: May 5, 2020

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**COVID-19 Update / Preliminary Planning for Future Re-opening:** On April 30 Governor Baker announced formation of a "Reopening Advisory Board" co-chaired by the Lt. Governor and Secretary of Housing and Economic Development. The 17-member board includes public health officials and leaders from the business community and municipal government to advise the administration on strategies to reopen the economy in phases ... with a report expected by May 18. The Governor's press release stated the report "will include DPH approved workplace safety standards, industry frameworks and customer protocols and guidelines, including enforcement mechanisms and coordination with municipal leaders."

Likewise, I have designated a task force to review the state guidance, orders and guidelines and conduct other research to help develop local protocols as the Commonwealth and Town embark on a measured, safe and gradual plan to re-establish services. The task force will initially focus upon Town Hall services and then gradually expand to look at how the Library and Senior Center will safely deliver services in our changed environment. The advisory task force includes:

- Bridget Sullivan, BOS and TM Executive Assistant
- Joseph Guarnera, Fire Chief and Emergency Management Director
- Brian Bruso, Acting Facilities Manager
- Jane O'Brien, Assistant Health Agent (designee of Health Agent)
- Nancy Burnham, Town Clerk and President of SEIU collective bargaining unit

The team will expand to include the Library and Senior Center directors as their work continues over time. We also welcome the Board of Selectmen to designate a liaison to participate in this process.

It is important to note that May 18 is not the "go" date to re-open all government and business services. This was reinforced by the Lt. Governor in a conference call today with the Mass. Municipal Association. Rather, the state will begin to issue guidance on how businesses and government will begin to re-open in phases and with health and safety as the guide.

Therefore the Town's existing policies with respect to limiting public gatherings of more than ten persons, practicing social distancing and the closure of non-essential workplaces and of municipal buildings to the public shall continue until further notice. Also, beginning tomorrow, the Governor's Order concerning face coverings goes into effect and we expect voluntary compliance with enforcement if necessary.

In conjunction with the Health Agent I continue to keep the Town's Web site ([www.athol-ma.gov](http://www.athol-ma.gov)) current with advisories, health tips, community updates and the operational status and best contact methods for all Town departments among other information.

**Budget Process Update:** Today I was pleased to co-host a Zoom discussion with over 120 government officials from communities primarily under 12,000 in population. Sean Cronin, the Sr. Deputy Commissioner of the DOR's Division of Local Services briefed the participants on the various reforms in Chapter 53 of the Acts of 2020 as well as a pending Senate bill to provide operational and budget flexibility to communities. Without going into details here is a sampling of some of the tools:

- Allows for Annual Town Meeting to occur after June 30
- Authorizes towns to develop 1/12 budgets to continue operations
- Allows towns to utilize certified free cash beyond the June 30 "close-out" date without penalty
- Allows communities to amortize COVID-19 deficit costs over three years
- Allows continuation of revolving funds at existing caps
- Allows communities to extend property and personal tax due dates to June 1 (Athol BOS has done)
- Allows communities to waive interest and fees on late payments if paid before June 30 (Athol BOS has done)
- PERAC has allowed retirement systems to extend the pre-payment dates for discounts on assessments (I have sent a request to our system)
- The Senate bill would allow a reduction in Town Meeting quorum requirements to not less than ten percent (10%) of the existing quorum (in Athol, 10 percent of one percent of registered voters; based upon recent meetings this would be between six and eight voters at the minimum level)

Since there is no firm timeline as of yet for updated state revenue projections or legislative budget action, and whereas even the extended tentative dates for town meetings remain in question from a social distancing and logistical perspective, towns were encouraged to prepare 1/12 budgets for endorsement by the Board of Selectmen and submittal to MassDOR as a stopgap. MassDOR is expected to release its formal guidance on the 1/12 budget process in the immediate future and I anticipate having a process and timeline for the 1/12 scenario available for your May 19 meeting.

**Miscellaneous:**

- Demolition has commenced at 1128 Main Street; the buildings have been razed and site work will continue this week. Grant funds of \$24,500 from the state Attorney General's office and \$2,500 from National Grid will offset the \$55,000-plus costs.
- My office completed robust sets of documentation to include finalizing financing for the streetlight acquisition and LED conversion project; closing documents with National Grid; and issuance of purchase orders and contracts for the new LED fixtures and installation.
- Participated in a gazillion Zoom and conference calls
- Executed with EDIC Chairman additional wetlands and conceptual planning scope for BSC Group to further analyze potential hotel site (via Mass Development matching fund grant)
- Participated in virtual meeting of the Rural Policy Advisory Commission
- Discussed potential creation of local COVID-19 assistance programs with BOS chair, Chamber and Community Coalition executives and others; discussed potential micro-loan assistance via North Quabbin Revolving Loan Fund with town planner and CDBG consultant.