

**Shaun A. Suhoski, Town Manager**Email: ssuhoski@townofathol.org**Bridget A. Sullivan, Executive Assistant**Email: selectmen@townofathol.org**MEMORANDUM**

TO: Athol Board of Selectmen
FR: Shaun A. Suhoski, Town Manager
RE: Town Manager's Expanded Report and Project Updates
DT: July 1, 2020

Dear Board,

This expanded report will provide summary updates regarding many ongoing matters both to bring Mr. Dodge current and to illustrate to the community that despite the limitations imposed by the COVID-19 pandemic, the Town continues to vigorously pursue planning and projects for the betterment of the community.

Rather than re-type the entire history of items, I would note that all of my historic reports remain available online at www.athol-ma.gov. Also, any particular questions can be emailed to me at ssuhoski@townofathol.org for prompt response.

Thank you!

FY21 Budget Update: In response to the dire predictions of negative revenue due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the Finance Team, Board of Selectmen and Finance and Warrant Advisory Committee have determined to utilize 1/12th budgeting for July, August and September with hopes to conduct the Annual Meeting on September 14 (see additional information following).

The Board voted, and Mass. Dept. of Revenue approved, a \$3.3 million general operating budget for July which included \$1.6 million pre-payment of our retirement assessment and roughly \$330,000 in workman's comp, police and fire liability and IOD, and property and casualty insurance annual premiums.

For the month of July: \$3,941,913.00.	
Expenditure Description	Amount
Municipal Expenditures	\$3,300,741.00
School Expenditures	\$93,729.00
Enterprise Funds	\$547,443.00

The DOR's approval also covered the first quarterly assessment for Monty Tech of \$93,729 and a combined total of \$547,443 total for water, wastewater and transfer station operations. These monthly budget are technically deficit spending until such time as Town Meeting voters can approve a fiscal year 2021 spending plan.

As discussed with the Board and finance committee we are finalizing and reviewing both August and September plans in advance of your next meeting for requested approval on July 21.

Note that the 1/12th budgets are based upon a **COVID-scenario FY21 budget of \$20,582,794**. This amount represents a 0.88 percent growth in general government expenses over FY20 and assumes a subsidy of \$350,000 to \$400,000 in free cash (from the \$1.5 million certified) to remain in balance and avoid layoffs of full-time staff. I will re-send the summary sheet for the DRAFT annual COVID-scenario budget under separate cover.

Annual Town Meeting Update and Recommendations: On June 25, a working group met via Zoom to discuss options and timing for conducting the Annual Meeting. The group included the BOS and FWAC chairs, Town Moderator, Town Clerk, Town Counsel, Town Manager, Health Agent and the Board's Executive Assistant.

Based upon substantial discussion over potential state budget timelines, health and safety, and logistics the team recommends the following to the Board of Selectmen:

Date: Monday, September 14, 2020 at 7pm
Quorum: Reduce to **"50"** (requires separate BOS vote after published notice)
Location: Memorial Hall – Social distancing to be practiced
Warrant: Standard ATM

Details: To be developed in advance of meeting for proper set-up:

- Chairs spaced six-feet apart (capacity to be analyzed in advance)
- Face coverings required (separate seating area for those not covered)
- Microphone on floor for attendees (obtain microphone "covers")
- Relocate department heads in manner to maximize spacing
- Follow DPH / BOH protocols

If the Board approves the above guidelines the office will provide notice that the quorum requirement will be discussed at your next public meeting on July 21 as it requires separate notice and vote.

COVID-19 Update:

Town Hall: Staff returned to a more traditional schedule with enhanced safety protocols on June 8, and began accepting and booking face-to-face meetings by appointment on June 15. Daily cleaning and weekly disinfection of the building was previously implemented as part of the required sanitation protocols. The task force is meeting next week to further review the Phase 2, Part 2 reopening plan with an eye towards enhancing public access if safe to do so.

Library: The full-time Library staff initiated a curb-side book delivery and return process on June 8 as well and reports indicate active use of this program. As reported previously, part-time staff are furloughed until September due to the temporary closure of the building.

Senior Center: The building remains closed to the public and group functions, however, the Director and our facilities manager have developed a process to allow one-on-one appointments in a safe manner to complete tax preparation assistance for those seniors who had previously enrolled for this service.

Outdoor Recreation Areas: On June 16 the following information was provided to the Board of Selectmen. A working group including the public health agents, beach director, public works management, Town Counsel and the town manager reviewed the Commonwealth's reopening plan guidance as relates to our capacity to staff and manage the sanitary requirements for the beaches, parks and playgrounds.

Due to the many constraints posed by COVID-19 sanitation and separation requirements, and due as well to the cost to the Town to try to meet enhanced maintenance with a limited revenue flow, the following determinations were made:

Beaches:

- NO lifeguards summer of 2020
- Swim at own risk
- No restroom facilities
- Carry in – carry out
- Weekly water sampling began June 30
- Face coverings required where social distancing not feasible

Parks and Playgrounds:

- Parks open dawn to dusk as per usual (eg. Fish Park; Silver Lake Park, etc.)
- Play areas / equipment to remain closed; review with future phases
- Fields may be reserved for groups of less than 10 subject to state DPH and local BOH guidelines
- Organized sports leagues to be reviewed with future phases
- No restroom facilities
- Carry in – carry out
- Face coverings required where social distancing not feasible

NOTICE

DUE TO COVID-19 PLEASE ENJOY ATHOL'S PARKS, PLAYGROUNDS and BEACHES AS FOLLOWS:





Please be courteous and practice physical distancing or wear a face covering as appropriate.

Observe all park rules and regulations.

Thank you for your cooperation!

Elementary School Disposition Update: This has remained an ongoing work item in the background since 2016. The initial recommended disposition scenario report of August 2, 2016 provides more information. Interestingly, though progress takes time, the buildings are evolving in accordance with the 2016 plan:

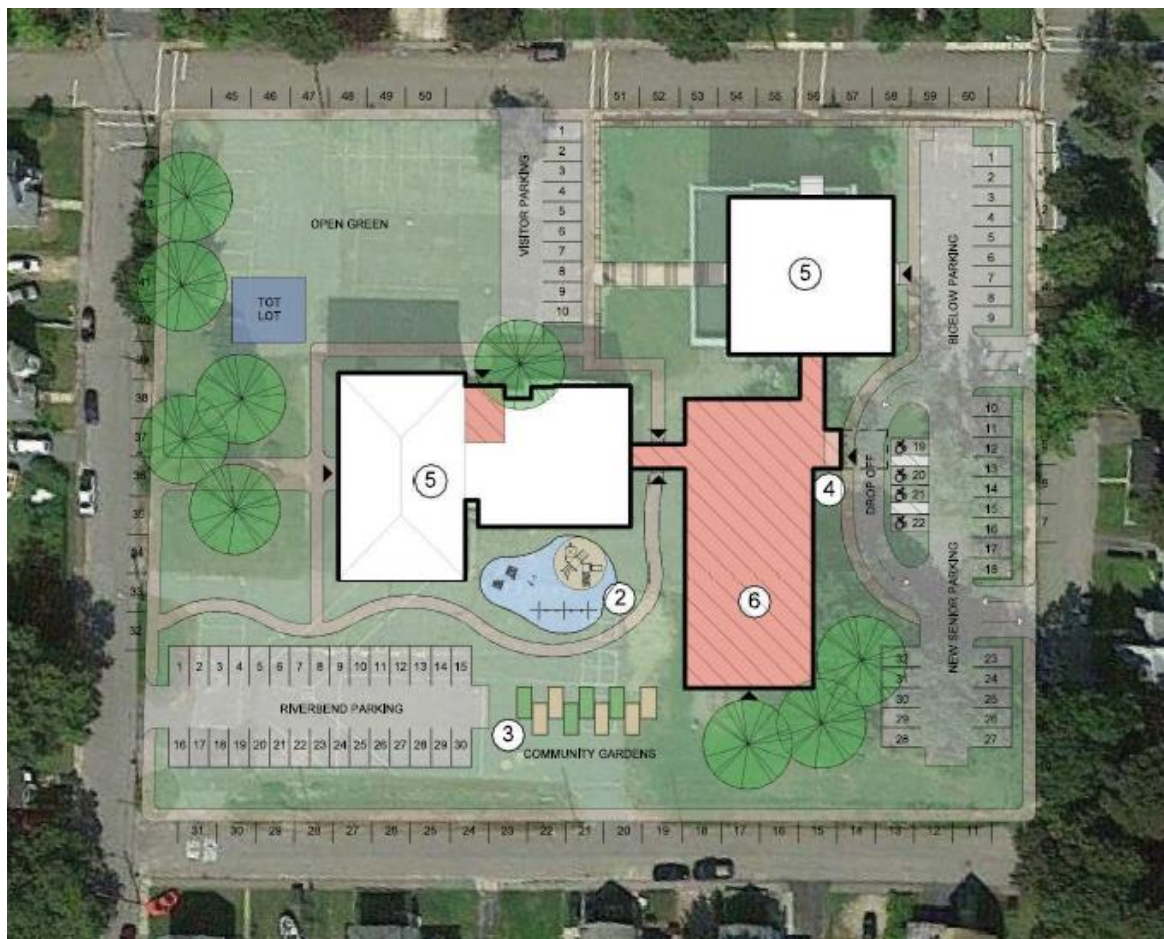
Pleasant Street School: Following an RFP in 2018 and upon recommendation from the Reuse Committee the Board endorsed a five-year lease with LaunchSpace, Inc. with an initial termination date of June 30, 2023. The lease envisions up to three additional five-year extensions and is intended to facilitate reuse of the premises as a non-profit “makerspace” with the ability to sub-let or conduct complementary programming.

The Town (\$35,000 capital funds) and LaunchSpace (\$105,000 MassDevelopment grant) combined to install a new heating and cooling system throughout the facility in 2019 and the parties are currently researching funding mechanisms for further improving the facility with an eye towards insulation and installation of solar on a new rooftop through the Green Communities program.

And, on July 2, 2019, the Board authorized LaunchSpace to sub-let a portion of the premises to the 202 Street Hockey league to facilitate construction of an outdoor hockey arena with donated financial support from the Boston Bruins Foundation. Although COVID-19 has resulted in a temporary halt in the league the project is fairly well advanced in construction.

Ellen Bigelow / Riverbend: The Town's initial RFP in 2016 resulted in no formal submittals, but, did establish interest among several non-profit developers. In 2018, in partnership with New Vue Communities, the buildings and site were the subject of a design competition sponsored by the Federal Home Loan Bank of Boston and the Citizens Housing and Planning Association. Though our graduate student teams' proposal finished second in the overall competition, the community outreach, design and financial pro forma work product proved that the buildings could be put into productive reuse as housing affordable to a range of incomes.

Based upon this legwork, the Town re-issued a RFP in 2019 to which New Vue and Icon Architecture responded; offering a plan of 53 units of affordable and inter-generational housing on the site. The plan would renovate and preserve the historic facades of the two school buildings and construct a new "connecting" building to accommodate the inter-generational units and provide universal accessibility throughout the campus. This \$20 million development would include on-site management and on-call maintenance.



Most recently, on June 16, the Board approved the Land Disposition Agreement with New Vue with an eye towards building the required capital and grant funding over the next 24 to 36 months with construction slated for 2024 and rent-up in 2025.

All parties are committed to advancing the schedule if subsidies can be allocated sooner (eg. historic tax credits, LIHTCs, etc.). Based upon my experience with similar projects I have a strong level of confidence that this project will come to fruition. Since the Town is not deeding over ownership until financing is secured the community can be confident that its best interests will be protected.

Sanders Street School: This property was auctioned in 2019 resulting in the sale of the school building and abutting field for \$45,000 to Jeffrey Miller, of Phillipston. My understanding is that Mr. Miller is working with a contractor with hopes of renovating the building to provide either apartment or condominium housing. This structure is no longer a public sector liability and is now on the tax rolls.

Downtown Revitalization and Planning: The Board may recall that once the North Quabbin Commons was under major development we turned our planning focus to the downtown district. In the municipal project world change takes several years from vision, to plan, to funding to construction. Thus, for the downtown district, I have sought to align all departments and funding sources with this vision to achieve results. So, what does that mean?

- A. *Master Planning (EOHED Grant):* In 2018 the Town Manager received an economic development planning grant of \$25,000 to initiate high-level visioning for downtown. This document, prepared by BSC Group in 2019, broke the downtown into four quadrants bisected by Main and Exchange Streets and suggested unique strategies for each zone (report to be emailed separately).



- I. **ZONE 1:** Church, Walnut, Union Streets – Utilize Community Development Block Grant (CDBG) funds to improve public infrastructure in this primarily residential neighborhood.
- II. **ZONE 2:** Main, Island, Marble and Exchange Streets – Build upon momentum from the reconstruction of Marble Street and renovation of the Exchange Street Bridge to develop shared parking to stimulate private investment into a bank, former church, proposed brew pub and other Exchange and Main Street enterprises.

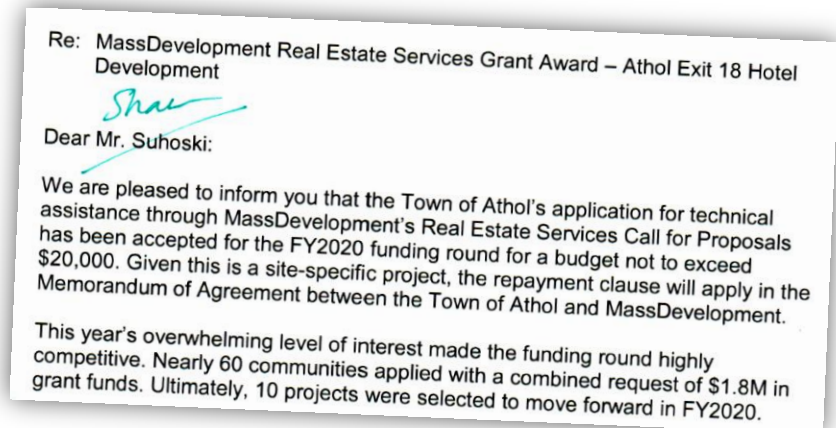
- III. **ZONE 3:** Lord Pond Plaza and environs – Plan and implement improvements to traffic circulation, design, pedestrian safety and environmental improvements cognizant of the buried stream and current urban heat sink effect of this area.
 - IV. **ZONE 4:** Exchange, South, Traverse and Main Streets – Engage the regional planning commission and/or others to explore dramatic and transformative visions to redevelop this obsolete area of downtown.
- B. *Community Development Block Grants:* With the Board’s assent, I directed CDBG and planning to complete a stalled downtown target area assessment so that the entire district would qualify under the slum and blight national objective. CDBG funds have since begun flowing into the urban core neighborhoods to include reconstruction of Marble Street and the very recent Church Street improvements. Engineering and of improvements to the length of Walnut Street is next.
- C. *Complete Streets Program:* A strong partnership between the DPW and the Planning departments facilitated completion of the Complete Streets Plan (endorsed by your Board). Based upon the plan, and with assistance from Howard Stein Hudson consultants, the Town’s first construction application was submitted to MassDOT in early June to reconstruct sidewalks around Fish Park, install high-visibility crosswalks, and supply two electronic traffic calming signs at each end of downtown on Main Street. The Town should learn about these funds in the near future.
- D. *Urban Renewal Plan:* Led by Eric Smith, and working with the Montachusett Regional Planning Commission, the Town will explore funding and redevelopment options for “Zone 4” of the downtown. Though the COVID-19 pandemic has slowed progress, work has been initiated by the MRPC through the District Local Technical Assistance program. A follow-up discussion with the Town’s development staff is expected in the coming week. In my opinion the Town will need to take bold steps to push along any redevelopment of the trio of vacant buildings on this stretch of Exchange Street and the long-vacant theater building.
- E. *Municipal Vulnerability Plan (MVP):* This project – with the engaged leadership and collaboration between Eric Smith, Dick Kilhart and town department heads and elected officials – has the potential to re-envision the Lord Pond Plaza into a more hospitable, safe and resilient space that will serve to enhance, rather than detract, from the downtown environment. The Town’s completed MVP application was submitted to the Executive Office of Environmental Affairs in June and, if funded, will spear-head long overdue improvements to this tract of buckling pavement.

The above is only a summary of major Town initiatives. Concurrently, the ongoing work of the Downtown Vitality Committee and volunteers, together with market, parking and streetscape studies facilitated through the town planner, will only yield more success. This work must remain a priority so that our historic center district becomes even more viable for the next 20 years.

Proposed Hotel on EDIC Site at Exit 18: I continue to lead planning efforts on this initiative in close coordination with Jim Meehan of the Economic Development Industrial Corp. with an eye towards developing conceptual plans and cost estimates to entice a developer to develop a quality hotel. This has long been a goal of the community and was part of the impetus to support and encourage complementary amenities (restaurants, retail, gas station, movie theater) in the development area.

In order to move this project forward the Town needed: (1) access to the landlocked site, (2) confirmation that there are sufficient uplands to support the development, (3) confidence that the market can support the facility, and (4) development of partnerships with the state and private sector to provide vehicular and utility access to the site.

In early 2020, through a grant from MassDevelopment, the Pinnacle Advisory Group completed market research that concluded the site will support a nationally branded, midscale hotel with 70 to 80 rooms. With a hotel deemed feasible, the BSC Group updated wetlands delineations to assess whether the site can accommodate a hotel, restaurant, function space and parking.



BSC's work is well underway and a conference call on July 1 confirmed that the site can support a three-story, 100-room hotel, a 100+/- seat restaurant and bar, and a 200 seat function facility with sufficient parking. The consultant is now preparing conceptual level illustrations for completion by project close-out at the end of the month. This information will later form the basis of a Request for Interest or Request for Proposals from the private sector to meet the Town's goals.

Besides providing a desired service and amenity to the Town and region, a hotel will supplement and diversify the Town's revenue streams due to the local room excise. This is especially helpful since the hospitality industry typically brings revenue from outside the area into a local economy.

LED Streetlight Conversion Underway: Yes, it's true. The long-awaited conversion of the Town's 805 streetlights is underway and residents may see utility-type trucks from Arden Engineering (marked "Arden") in their neighborhoods over the next six to seven weeks. There was one crew this past week with work beginning in the Lenox, Lincoln and Twichell street neighborhood. An additional crew is expected after the Fourth of July holiday and they will typically work four, 10-hour days weekly.

Energy and Cost Savings

Parameter (Annual):	Before Upgrade	Post Upgrade	Savings	Savings (%)
Energy Consumption (kWh)	348,825	110,746	238,079	68%
Annual Facility Charges	\$98,004	\$0	\$98,004	100%
Annual Electricity Delivery Charges	\$18,823	\$10,737	\$8,086	43%
Annual Electricity Supply Charges	\$30,592	\$9,712	\$20,880	68%
Annual Maintenance Cost	\$0	\$19,320	(\$19,320)	N/A
Total Street Lights Expenditures	\$147,418	\$39,769	\$107,649	73%
Average Cost per Fixture	\$183	\$49	\$134	73%

Payback and Net Project Savings

Project Payback: 2.1 years
20 Year Net Project Savings: \$ 2,702,425

The net total project cost is \$231,408 inclusive of acquisition costs and \$72,000 in utility and state subsidies. The project will result in savings of over \$2.7 million over 20 years with an initial return on investment of 2.1 years.

Potential New Route 2 Interchange at South Athol Road: The Montachusett Regional Planning Commission (MRPC) completed their feasibility study in September 2019 with a finding that the proposal would have “merit on a number of levels.” However, the 66-page report – which is filled with data to support the findings – also spells out a difficult and expensive (estimated at \$20 million) process to advance such a major initiative.

While it seems obvious to me that the Town will wish it had an additional access point to Route 2 in the future, given all of the other ongoing work, until such time as this idea can be fully presented to the public for consideration it will remain a work-in-progress. Should the Board wish to pursue this initiative, the next steps would be to formally initiate the project with MassDOT through an online submission tool (see excerpt from page 52 of the report following).

In summary, to get the Interchange project constructed, the Town needs to complete steps 1, 2, and 5. The remaining steps are completed by MassDOT and the MMPO. However, the Town needs to stay involved in the process which will help to assure that the Interchange project continues to move forward:

1. Using MassDOT’s online project initiation tool, MaPIT, the Town identifies project needs.
2. Using MaPIT, project proponent (the Town) works with a MassDOT District Office or other MassDOT Section to define project scope, costs, timeline, impacts and responsibilities.
3. District Office or other MassDOT Section submits project to the Project Review Committee for approval.
4. MassDOT and its Project Review Committee (PRC) act upon the PIF. If the project is approved by the PRC, the community is notified and, if applicable, initiates the design process for the project.
5. The Town then needs to hire a design consultant and also begins work on the right of way plans as well as any permits, local approvals, etc.
6. During this phase the project is incorporated into the regional TIP by the MMPO. Placement and prioritization of the project is based upon available funds, evaluation criteria scoring, design status and public support and comments.
7. Design public hearing is held at the 25% design phase.
8. Design progresses to 100% and all plans, specifications and estimates (PS&E) are completed. Project is then ready for advertisement by MassDOT.

Miscellaneous: In addition to my general administrative duties, I am also working on the following:

- Solar field development at former landfill; on hold due to NGRID study and SMART program changes
- Developing “economic development plan” response requested by state legislators in support of bill to increase liquor license quota to “20” for the community
- Closing out demolition grant for 1128 Main Street (additional landscaping and improvements pending)
- Appointed Brian Bruso as permanent building superintendent; filled temporary building and wiring inspection; preparing recruitment for wiring inspector and sealer of weights and measures
- Working with Athol Bird & Nature Club, Town Planner and Town Counsel on process to potentially lease the rooftop and portion of 100 Main Street to provide cell service “densification” downtown while generating needed revenue stream for maintenance of the building
- Remaining informed on latest health, safety and economic impacts and reopening plans related to the COVID-19 pandemic; seeking all available funding sources to plug lost revenues due to COVID-19
- Pursuing EPA partial clean-up of 62 Canal St. (former toy factory); working with Eric Smith and MRPC brownfields for additional assessment; imagine senior housing with a waterfront park someday!