

TOWN OF ATHOL: FY20 BUDGET MESSAGE

Shaun A. Suhoski, Town Manager

April 2, 2019

To: Board of Selectmen
Finance and Warrant Advisory Committee
Citizens of the Town of Athol



Greetings!

In accordance with Chapter 8 of Athol's Town Charter, the Town Manager shall present the ensuing fiscal year's budget proposal to a joint session of the Board of Selectmen and Finance and Warrant Advisory Committee at least sixty days prior to the start of the spring Annual Town Meeting. I look forward to tonight's discussion.

In fiscal 2016 we built a budget based upon fiscal restraint which included reductions in hours for current staff, a shift of health insurance premium costs from the town to its employees and limited wage adjustments.

Fiscal 2017 was a budget premised upon making responsible decisions was advanced and approved in a year that saw the Town's finances begin to improve based upon conservative budgeting and improving revenues, while FY18 the budget sought to restore key services, bolster the Town's reserves for the future while providing some tax rate relief. The current fiscal year budget sought to demonstrate resolve in the face of many competing demands for increased resources.

Working closely with the Town's financial officers (Town Accountant Christine Mailloux, Principal Assessor Lisa Aldrich and Treasurer/Collector Tammy Collier), I am pleased to present a \$20 million proposed operating budget that balances savings in health insurance premium reserve costs with targeted increases to public safety, education and supports for our senior citizens.

A budget is more of a policy document than a numbers document. And, in FY20, Athol's public servants will **aspire** to provide even better customer service and to set the bar just a bit higher in our everyday tasks.

as•pire – verb

- To seek to attain or accomplish a particular goal;
- Ascend; soar.

- Merriam-Webster

Our department heads will work with me to improve collaboration with civic groups and citizen volunteers on events such as the town-wide cleanup on April 27. I strongly believe the next year promises forward progress across our community as we engage in the **Aspire! Athol** theme.

HIGHLIGHTS OF FY20 PROPOSAL

The proposed \$20,041,276 operating budget represents an overall increase of 4.46 percent over fiscal 2019 inclusive of debt service while general government departments would increase by 3.4 percent over FY19 net of debt service. The proposal would maintain at least level services and also:

- ✓ Enhance educational funding by meeting the estimated assessments of the Athol-Royalston and Montachusett Regional school districts.

- ✓ Restore command structure at the police department allowing with three sergeants and one lieutenant.
- ✓ Fund an additional full-time Firefighter/EMT to supplement strained resources necessary to operate a safe advanced life support program.
- ✓ Increase training opportunities for all first responders.
- ✓ Provide additional, necessary supports for our senior citizens.

In summary, I believe the FY20 operating budget proposal will afford the citizens access to the services they desire and deserve within a conservative and responsible fiscal posture.

LOOKING AHEAD

As Town Manager, a key component of my role is to keep my eyes on the horizon. In order to continue the remarkable progress of recent years we must all remain engaged to plan for the future with both short- and longer-term vision.

In the coming months and year I will seek to further develop the downtown action plan to stimulate reinvestment in the core of the community and will engage the Board of Selectmen, state legislators and others as appropriate to navigate the capacity issues with National Grid so that the proposed solar project on the capped landfill can advance.

It is intended that revenues from the proposed solar facility – and the nascent marijuana industry – be targeted towards capital needs in the community. The Finance and Warrant Advisory Committee, Capital Planning Committee, Board of Selectmen and the Town Manager have agreed in principle to advance a five-year, formalized capital plan with identified funding streams in the coming months.

Work will continue with the EDIC and others to recruit a quality developer for a hotel near Exit 18 that will generate jobs, property tax and room excise revenue to meet growing demands for service. Towards that end I have filed a request for technical assistance with MassDevelopment which, if funded, would advance conceptual planning and marketing efforts.

We also need advance a targeted review of the Zoning Bylaws to ensure our land use regulations serve the dual purpose of protecting the standard of living while removing obstacles to responsible development along prime transportation corridors. And, I remain convinced that an additional Route 2 exit interchange at South Athol Road must be studied and pursued if feasible and desired by the community.

Athol's success is the result of collaboration among elected and appointed policy-making boards, municipal staff and participants at Annual Town Meeting. I thank you all for your continued guidance and support as we continue to move an agenda of responsible progress forward.

Respectfully,



Shaun A. Suhoski
Town Manager