



Town Administrator's Report Board of Selectmen's Meeting of Dec. 18, 2023

Report covers from December 2, 2023 to December 15, 2023

Items requiring Board vote or discussion are noted with an asterisk ()*

A. Town Department Reports/Requests

(1) Planning Board Zoning Review Project Public Forum Summary

The Planning Board held a public forum on December 6, 2023 hosted by personnel from the Metropolitan Area Planning Council (MAPC), both at Town Hall and via virtual connection. I was in attendance along with the Selectmen and the forum focused on defining a list of possible “place types” that are a precursor to possibly setting up defined district zones in Essex. Presently, outside of three small zoning districts in the Town, every other parcel is within the Town’s General Zone. It is possible to bring to a future Town Meeting a proposal to designate selected portions of the General Zone as new zoning districts, likely starting with residential districts. Any parcel that does not get included in a proposal for a new district will remain in the General Zone and all uses will remain possible there.

At the forum, members of the public in the meeting room and participating on line, began to express ideas and opinions concerning whether certain areas of the Town were good candidates for specific zones. MAPC has developed an on-line tool that will remain available to the public until early in 2024 that allows residents to make their own assertions about possible new zones. Thereafter, MAPC will review all of the input and present the data. The on-line tool, known as Social Pinpoint, may be accessed [here](#). On December 7, 2023, MAPC personnel held a check-in meeting with Town personnel and officials to go over the mechanics of continuing to collect public input on the prospect of future zoning districts.

Recommendation: I will update the Board as necessary.

B. Computer Systems

No items.

C. Personnel

(1) Revision to Essex Police Association Collective Bargaining Agreement (*)

The Town and the Essex Police Association have been discussing the union’s request for additional compensation for certified Field Training Officers (FTOs) while training new personnel. Recent changes to standards in this area require all new personnel to undergo 20 shifts of training under the supervision of a FTO and, along with the required documentation process, FTOs have increased

responsibilities and liabilities. The parties have developed a proposal for the Board's review and approval that would provide FTOs with an additional \$7.50 per hour, only while training new personnel, with no contribution to an FTO's overtime rate.

Recommendation: Board approval and signature of the proposed contract amendment.

(2) Next Safety Committee Meeting

The next Safety Committee meeting will be held on December 20, 2023. I will attend as a member of the Committee and Chairman Pereen usually attends as well.

Recommendation: I will update the Board as necessary.

D. Procurement/Ongoing Projects

(1) Specification, Bid Assistance, & Oversight of Public Safety Building Repairs (*)

At the last meeting, the Board agreed that I should reach out to Copeland Building Consultants to seek a proposal for specification, bid assistance, and construction oversight for repairs to the roof and building envelope of the public safety facility. The proposal will include the development of a scope of services arrived at by specifying all repairs that are necessary and options for each type of repair that might vary the cost (where possible). The next service included in the proposal would be to develop a construction-level cost estimate. The consultant would then provide bidding assistance (from the technical side only) and construction oversight (with involvement from our roofing expert, Northeast Roof Consultants).

Copeland has developed a proposal to manage this project along with Northeast Roof Consultants for a total cost of \$112,400. About \$50,000 of that proposed cost appears to be for construction administration, since it will be important to have our experts on site to direct and scrutinize the repair work. That cost could certainly be decreased but the quality of the work could suffer.

Recommendation: Board discussion as necessary.

(2) Possible School District Operations Review (*)

At the last meeting, the Board agreed that I should reach out to several consulting firms that customarily conduct school district operations reviews to determine whether any firm saw the current level of available funding (\$40,000) as being able to produce any worthwhile results. The Board also asked me to reach out to academia to understand whether a group at a university had the potential to assist the Town in a similar fashion.

With respect to private firms, I contacted Hanover Research, New Solutions K12, SchoolWorks, DMG, and PCG. Of those five firms, two (Hanover and New Solutions) expressed interest in discussing a possible engagement further. Preliminary discussions with the two firms indicates that cooperation from the District is very important in working toward a worthwhile product.

With respect to academia, I began by contacting the Collins Center at UMass Boston, since we have used that group in the past (shared service study between Essex and Manchester). Collins Center personnel have the ability to conduct this type of work but they will not do so without full buy-in from District personnel and officials.

Presently, we expect that the School Committee will be discussing possible cooperation in this type of operations review when the Committee meets on December 19, 2023. The Committee's stance on the matter is very important to how any type of scope of work with a consultant will be structured.

Recommendation: **Board discussion as necessary.**

(3) Procurement for Centennial Grove Restroom Facility

At a previous meeting, the Board agreed that the new restroom facility for the Centennial Grove that was funded at the Fall Town Meeting should be of the pre-cast concrete type. As such, I have finalized an Invitation for Bids (IFB) for a modular facility with six, separate restrooms that will also serve as changing facilities (similar to the sample design that the Board reviewed). The IFB will be available as of December 20, 2023 and bids are due by January 18, 2024. I have taken steps to advertise the IFB in the *Central Register*, the *Gloucester Times*, the Comm-Buys State website, and via local posting, all as required.

Recommendation: I will update the Board as necessary.

(4) Procurement for the Potential Sale of Gregory Island Road Properties

At a previous meeting, the Board agreed that five Town-owned parcels on Gregory Island should again be put up for possible sale. As such, all property owners on Gregory Island have been notified about the new offering and we have posted the offering in Town Hall and have advertised it in the *Central Register*. All five properties will have minimum offer amounts as specified by the Board but, unlike in the first offering, no use restrictions are being sought. All offers are due on January 18, 2024.

Recommendation: I will update the Board as necessary.

(5) Fixed-Rate Natural Gas and Electricity Contract Discussion (*)

As the Board may recall, Chairman Preen has been authorized to enter into a new, fixed-rate natural gas contract with supplier NRG when rates are favorable. At the time of that authorization, natural gas rates were higher than the Town's

fixed-rate that expired in late-November (the Town is currently under the National Grid default supply rate). Recently, natural gas prices decreased precipitously and I contacted NRG for a new quote. Since the Town is not a particularly large user of natural gas, NRG explained that this factor, in conjunction with the fact that NRG purchases natural gas in advance, will still not allow for favorable pricing at this time. However, if the natural gas price decline becomes sustained, it is very possible that a favorable rate could be offered in the near future. Chairman Preen has already been authorized by the Board to sign a long-term contract if this occurs.

With this sharp decrease in natural gas prices, future fixed-rate pricing for electricity has also substantially declined. Even though the Town is still in a fixed-rate electricity contract with Constellation for another year, it is possible to supersede that contract with more favorable pricing. Constellation is presently working to provide the Town with some pricing options.

Recommendation: **Board discussion concerning taking advantage of low electricity pricing even before the Town's current fixed-rate contract ends.**

E. Insurance

(1) Monthly Pothole Log

I have received from the DPW the pothole log for the month of November. No potholes were reported. The log is intended to document potholes and their rapid repair in order to limit the Town's liability.

Recommendation: No further action is necessary.

F. Facilities

(1) Senior Center Generator Pre-Test

Each year, the State Elevator Inspector requires the Town to test the elevator at the Essex Senior Center on generator power. Recently, we have had issues with getting the generator test to be successful. The Assistant Electrical Inspector and I ran some pre-testing on December 4, 2023, in order to be ready for this year's elevator inspection. The elevator once again is not operating properly on generator power, despite the fact that the generator appears to have ample output. During the test, the Assistant Electrical Inspector noted that a component within the Automatic Transfer Switch (ATS) in the basement may have had circuitry problems associated with it when the building is being run by generator.

On December 13, 2023, a technician from our generator contractor came out and conducted additional testing. While he understood the symptoms that seemed to be pointing to the ATS component, he explained that the component in question is not related to the power path for the elevator's hydraulic pump motor. Instead, he suggested that the problem is either a faulty voltage regulator within the generator

or that the pump motor in the elevator is reaching the end of its useful life and is drawing way too much current on startup (beyond the capacity of the generator). The latter would explain why we did not have a problem running the elevator on generator in the past (either with our old generator or with our new one – which is the same size as the old one). Presently, before any additional funding is spent on this matter, I am awaiting guidance from our elevator contractor concerning whether a motor problem is the likely cause.

Recommendation: I will update the Board as necessary.

(2) Transfer of Municipal Fiber Cable and Light to New Utility Poles

National Grid has set two new utility poles that have Town utilities on them and Verizon is working to manage getting all utilities moved over to the new poles. One of the poles just has municipal fiber optic cables on it but the other pole also has a Town-owned street light on it. I contacted our fiber optic contractor and I will arrange for the relocation of the municipal fiber optic cables. With respect to the street light, I will be attempting to see if the Ipswich Light Department will handle that work.

Recommendation: I will update the Board as necessary.

(3) Repair of Town Hall Sprinkler System Backflow Preventer

As reported previously, the backflow preventer for the Town Hall fire sprinkler system failed a recent, routine test by the Water Department's testing contractor. Our sprinkler system contractor visited Town Hall on December 14, 2023 and made the necessary repairs. The Water Department will have the device tested again to confirm compliance.

Recommendation: No further action is necessary.

G. Fiscal/Budget

(1) Regional School District Tentative Budget Hearing Summary (*)

I attended the subject budget hearing along with the Selectmen and the Finance Committee on December 13, 2023. The School Committee has proposed an overall fiscal year 2025 operating budget increase of 3.45%, which works out to an approximately 5.31% increase to Essex according to the formula in the Regional Agreement (Manchester's proposed increase at this stage is approximately 2.35%). At the hearing, the Chairman of the Essex Finance Committee commented that the Town of Essex would like to see the District revise the budget proposal so that the overall budget increase is no more than 2.5% (which will still translate to a significant increase to Essex). Superintendent Pamela Beaudoin explained that the main budget drivers are teacher wages increases (averaging about 4%), health insurance increases (planning currently on 9%), and out-of-District placement of student (increasing around 4.8%). Maintenance is also up by about 4.6%.

Recommendation: **Board discussion as necessary.**

(2) Preliminary Review of Selectmen's FY25 Operating and Capital Budgets (*)

The Town Accountant released the annual call for operating and capital budget requests to all departments during the week of December 11, 2023, on behalf of the Finance Committee. I have developed a preliminary package for the Board with respect to both the operating and the capital budget.

Recommendation: **Board review of these preliminary materials.**

H. Complaints

No items.

I. Meetings Attended

No items.

J. Town Meeting, By-Laws, and Regulations

No items.

K. Legal Issues

(1) Sewer Inspection Camera Sharing Agreement Renewal (*)

For many years, the Town of Essex and the Town of Rockport have shared a color sewer inspection camera. Agreements have typically been for five years at a time and the most recent agreement expires this year. The Superintendent of Public Works is in favor of renewing the agreement and the Town of Rockport is presently considering a renewal.

Recommendation: **Board authorization of the signature of a successor agreement outside of a meeting if Rockport concurs.**

L. Grants

(1) MAPC Technical Assistance Grant Application, Open Space Plan (*)

The Town's Open Space and Recreation Plan (OSRP) requires updating every five years in order for the Town to remain eligible for certain State grants. While the Town has never applied for any of the grants in question, the Open Space Committee desires that the OSRP remain updated in keeping with the Town's Strategic Plan and the OSRP is now out of date. To that end, the Metropolitan Area Planning Committee's (MAPC) Technical Assistance Program (TAP) is a potential source of funding for updating the plan and applications for the next round of funding are being accepted through January 12, 2024. Importantly, even

though the TAP grant could technically assist the Affordable Housing Trust with the development of a Housing Production Plan, I am told by MAPC personnel that funding for that purpose is not likely and that the Open Space Plan is a better fit based on the high level of funding assistance that the Town has received from MAPC lately.

Recommendation: Board vote to authorize me to complete and submit the necessary electronic application.

(2) Community Planning Grant Quarterly Report

I have completed and filed the subject report with the State for the quarter ending December 31, 2023. This grant is funding a complete review of the Town's zoning bylaw and much progress has been made over the past quarter. In the new year, the Metropolitan Area Planning Council (MAPC) will work toward recommending some initial new zoning districts within the Town.

Recommendation: No further action is necessary.

(3) Hazard Mitigation Plan Update Grant Quarterly Report

I have completed and filed the subject report with the State for the quarter ending December 31, 2023. This grant is assisting the Town with the update of its Federal Hazard Mitigation Plan, as guided by personnel from MAPC. A public hearing will be held at a Selectmen's meeting in February as the update process moves along.

Recommendation: No further action is necessary.

(4) GAP II Energy Grant Quarterly Report

The Town Planner has completed and filed the subject report for the quarter ending December 31, 2023. This grant, along with various utility rebates and incentives, allowed the Town to upgrade equipment within the water and sewer systems to more energy efficient models (old equipment needed to be replaced anyway). Most of the work has been completed and we are just waiting on a few items so that the grant can be closed out.

Recommendation: No further action is necessary.

M. Emergency Planning

No items.

N. Other Items

(1) Town Administrator Leave

I was out of the office, on leave, on December 8 and 11, 2023.

This report is available at www.essexma.org on the morning after any regularly scheduled Essex Board of Selectmen's Meeting.