



## Town Administrator's Report Board of Selectmen's Meeting of February 7, 2022

*Report covers from January 22, 2022 to February 4, 2022*

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

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### A. Town Department Reports/Requests

#### (1) Economic Development Committee Meeting Summary (\*)

I coordinated and attended a virtual meeting of the Economic Development Committee (EDC) on January 26, 2022, along with the Town Planner and Chairman Pereen. The meeting featured a discussion with respect to a variety of areas where new Chairman Jodi Harris would like to focus the Committee's efforts. While the Committee did provide some input with respect to COVID recovery over the past two years, the Chairman would like to move back toward the core elements of the Essex Economic Development Plan that was completed just before the COVID crisis commenced.

One topic of specific discussion was the Committee's take on whether and how funding for the promotion of the Town's resources and attractions should be restored. To that end, the Committee's consensus is that such funding should be focused on investing in downtown areas that have been created but that are not presently getting adequate maintenance, upkeep, and beautification (such as the several "pocket parks" in the downtown area). The Committee feels that putting promotional funding into this beautification process will enhance the downtown as a place where visitors and residents alike want to spend time.

Generally speaking, the Committee recommends consistently maintaining and refreshing all areas that have already been improved. Further, the Committee feels that any new improvements should be thought out very carefully. For example, if the Town does eventually move ahead with decorative lighting in the downtown area, it would be important to have a budget to consistently hang and refresh themed banners and to maintain hanging plants/flowers and seasonal decorations.

*Recommendation:* **Board discussion as necessary.**

### B. Computer Systems

#### (1) Exploration of Additional Microsoft 365 Products

At the last meeting, the Board agreed that the Town should purchase ten monthly subscriptions to the Microsoft Teams virtual meeting application, which I have moved ahead with. The Board also asked about Microsoft's on-line file storage/sharing application (SharePoint) and a Microsoft chat feature. I have learned that the chat feature is embedded in Teams and will be available to anyone who is given a Teams license. File sharing space might be included with

Teams but we are not certain of that as yet. Presently, our Microsoft reseller is working to determine the best path forward for the Town with respect to overall licensing and I will distribute the ten Teams licenses that we have requested once the licenses become active on our tenancy.

*Recommendation:* No further action is necessary.

(2) Cybersecurity Interview, Homeland Security Councils of Massachusetts

The Northeast Homeland Security Regional Advisory Council (NERAC) – one of several in the State - is presently participating in a project that involves interviews of communities of varying size with respect to the possible future establishment of a regional Chief Information Security Officer (CISO) position. The councils are using B. Riley Advisory Services to help review the need for such a position and Essex was chosen as an example of a small community from our region. A regional CISO would help support the information/technology needs of Massachusetts communities, with particular attention to cybersecurity.

I participated in an interview with B. Riley on February 2, 2022. The B. Riley team is in the discovery phase of the Councils' study and is learning what information regarding municipal cybersecurity has already been gathered and analyzed so that it can be built upon (rather than duplicate existing data or efforts). We discussed the Town's cybersecurity needs and how the Town has already collaborated with other area communities, with the Town of Danvers as the lead, to put in place a comprehensive regional security fabric using the Fortinet platform. The team was very interested in the regional collaborative that is already up and running in our area. Also, I made clear that it would be most helpful within our region if anyone who is hired (and their staff) as a result of this project is geared toward implementing real solutions (as opposed to just generating reports and recommendations).

*Recommendation:* I will update the Board as necessary.

**C. Personnel**

(1) Requests for Hourly Wage Increases for Fiscal Year 2023 (\*)

Two departments have requested the hourly wage for certain positions be increased to reflect what the market pays for the same position in other communities. Such requests need to come before the Board of Selectmen, acting in its capacity as the Personnel Board, for consideration as to whether the Board will recommend changes on the Wage & Salary Scale that gets considered at the Annual Town Meeting in May.

The Board of Health Administrator has indicated that most public health nurses in our area make around \$50 per hour. In Essex, the current wage range for this position is \$30.30 to \$36.11. With nurses in demand due to the pandemic, she is concerned about being able to retain and/or recruit personnel in the future. She

suggests that the wage be increased over two or three fiscal years and the present budget would be able to accommodate a large increase, even if level-funded, since the budget is not presently being fully utilized.

The Board of Library Trustees has indicated that library directors in surrounding communities all make considerably more per hour than the position pays in Essex. The current Essex wage range for this position is \$29.84-\$32.57. To date, the Trustees have not been able to find other library directors in our immediate area who are paid hourly, versus an annual salary. The Trustees have provided data on one community with an hourly director, Princeton (a town that matches Essex in population), and that rate is \$33.88 for 23-28 hours per week. The Board of Library Trustees would like to see the Essex position pay \$40.00 per hour and would like the number of hours worked per week to increase from 35 to 40.

*Recommendation:* **Board discussion as necessary.**

#### **D. Procurement/Ongoing Projects**

##### (1) Old Fire Station Site Restoration Project Update (\*)

Chairman Pereen and I participated in a construction meeting with respect to the subject project on January 24, 2022, along with our Project Manager, and representatives of our contractor (Encore Contracting Services – ECS). After the site work subcontractor for the project backfilled and rough-graded the site recently, activity at the site again ground to a halt.

At the meeting on the 24<sup>th</sup>, ECS indicated that the next step would be to bring in the electrical subcontractor that would be: a) digging the trench for the underground electrical conduit, b) laying the conduit, and c) making an electrical connection between the utility pole on Martin Street and the location of the future viewing shed / the feed to the municipal parking lot lights. However, at the meeting, ECS was not certain of the name of the electrical subcontractor or the schedule for commencement of work.

Later that same week, the Town was informed by ECS that the electrical subcontractor they had first lined up required a major increase in the price that had originally been quoted to ECS. Presumably, ECS did not have a sufficiently-durable contract in place to hold the original pricing. The project is also extremely behind schedule, even taking into consideration the additional time that the Town allowed for the unforeseen need to replace a storm drain line on the site. As such, at the recommendation of our Project Manager, and with the concurrence of Chairman Pereen, I sent a letter to ECS and its bonding surety company indicating that the Town was considering declaring a Contractor Default and asked for a meeting to discuss the contractor's performance. No response from the contractor was available at the time of printing of this report.

*Recommendation:* **Board discussion as necessary.**

(2) Conomo Point Seawall Replacement Project Update

(\*)

Selectman Phippen and I participated in a construction meeting for the subject project on February 2, 2022. Our contractor has now poured and stripped the forms from the first section of reinforced concrete wall and plans to pour the next section in the near future. Going forward, our contractor will use revised techniques with respect to installing rebar in areas with protruding bedrock that have been worked out by our engineering consultant. Unless other types of situations are encountered, there should be no need for additional change orders associated with bedrock topography. Further, we discussed an event that occurred during the recent blizzard where a portion of the blankets keeping the curing concrete warm blew off for a period of time. Our engineering consultant will ensure that proper testing and observation are done to verify that the event did not translate to any quality or longevity issues.

At the last meeting, the Board discussed a request by an abutter to substitute basswood trees for red cedar trees that will replace the basswood trees that had to be removed to construct the seawall. The Board was not opposed to exploring this substitution, especially since the abutter is willing to pay any difference in price. We have learned that our contractor may get some new nursery quotes on the entire planting package and it is possible that the basswood substitution will not cost more money. We will have more information in the coming weeks.

*Recommendation:* **Board discussion as necessary.**

(3) Route 133 Essex River Bridge Replacement Project Update

I attended a construction meeting with respect to the subject project on February 1, 2022. The project is moving along as expected and construction crews continue to work on the foundational elements of the temporary bypass bridge that is expected to be in use sometime during March. Residents have approached me about whether any of those elements or even the entire bridge could be left in place after the existing bridge is fully replaced. I did inquire about those questions and Mass DOT has indicated that, for a variety of reasons, including longevity, permitting, and non-ownership of the property in question would prevent anything short of full removal and site restoration.

*Recommendation:* I will update the Board as necessary.

(4) Army Corps of Engineers Beneficial Sediment Reuse Study Update (\*)

As the board may recall, on a track parallel to the Town's quest for Federal maintenance dredging of the Essex River (which has recently been fully funded at 100% Federal share), the Town has been working with the Army Corps of Engineers (ACOE) to understand how sediment dredged from the channel might be beneficially reused within the Essex River system. The study is being conducted as part of the Corps' Section 204 program. The study is aligned well with the final report of the Massachusetts Coastal Erosion Commission (2015)

that encouraged the beneficial re-use of dredged sediment within a given system (as opposed to disposing of sediment offshore or at a land disposal site).

Selectman Phippen and I met virtually with ACOE personnel on January 26, 2022 to get an update on the status of the Section 204 study, including an estimate of when a report might be issued. Presently, we expect that the 204 study report will be issued in the late spring of 2022. The timing works well, since we don't expect that traditional, maintenance dredging would commence until the winter of 2023/2024 (as opposed to the next possible winter cycle of 2022/2023). It is possible that some of the recommendations in the 204 study might actually bring the project cost down below the cost of traditional, maintenance dredging, in which case, the 204 plan (which includes beneficial reuse) becomes the Corps' new base plan and would be implemented at 100% Federal share. Time will tell whether the cost and necessary non-traditional permitting or inability to secure property owner easements will hinder the viability of the 204 innovative work.

*Recommendation:* **Board discussion as necessary.**

## **E. Insurance**

### (1) Monthly Pothole Log

I obtained the pothole log for the month of January from the Department of Public Works during the week of January 31, 2022. The log is intended to document and rapidly repair and potholes that have been reported. No potholes were reported during the month of January.

*Recommendation:* No further action is necessary.

## **F. Facilities**

### (1) Replacement of Compressor in Town Hall HVAC Condenser (\*)

As the Board may recall, the Town Hall split-mechanism heating and cooling system utilizes three large condenser units to support air exchangers in each of the various offices and rooms in the building. The compressor in one of the condensers failed this past summer and the system was running on just two of the units (since a replacement compressor was not available due to supply chain issues). The system continued to run in air conditioning mode into the fall and also did provide heat for a short period after we switched over from air conditioning. However, the system malfunctioned again in its two-unit configuration and has been out of service for months (we have been heating the building exclusively with our ultra-efficient gas furnace).

Now that the replacement compressor has finally arrived, our HVAC contractor will visit Town Hall on February 7, 2022 to size up the logistics of actually getting the old compressor out and the new compressor installed. When the system was initially installed, a crane was used to lift the various components in

place. Also, a stockade fence runs around the units, making it difficult to access. Even so, our contractor was fairly confident at the time of printing of this report that he will not need a crane or to take down the fence. Further, our contractor will take a look at why the system was now not capable of running on even just the two condenser units. While all of the parts involved in this repair are provided at no charge due to the system's warranty, labor is not included in the warranty. I will have more information by meeting time.

*Recommendation:* **Board discussion as necessary.**

## **G. Fiscal/Budget**

(1) School Budget Collaboration Group Meeting Summary (\*)  
Selectman Bradford, Finance Committee Chairman Buttrick, and I participated in the subject meeting on January 28, 2022. The meeting featured a discussion regarding whether the District is able to reduce the overall fiscal year 2023 school district operating budget further than what has been discussed to date. On January 25, 2022, the School Committee supported budget revisions that would bring the overall increase in the apportioned part of the budget down to about 2.78%, which would bring Essex's specific apportionment increase down from 4.97% to about 4.22%. The group's discussion on the 28<sup>th</sup> was centered around bringing the Town's increase down closer to 3.5%. Subsequently, at the School Committee meeting of February 1, 2022, the Committee decided to consider possible ways to make additional cuts to the fiscal year 2023 operating budget proposal and took no vote on the budget at that time. A vote on the final budget proposal is expected at the Committee's meeting of February 15, 2022.

*Recommendation:* **Board discussion as necessary.**

## **H. Complaints**

No items.

## **I. Meetings Attended**

(1) Addison Gilbert Community Health Needs Assessment Listening Session  
Every three years, the Addison Gilbert Hospital in Gloucester conducts its Community Health Needs Assessment to get a good sense of how health priorities in the surrounding communities may have changed. I participated in a virtual listening session that the hospital coordinated on January 25, 2022. The program included an overview of the process and participants were then divided into break out groups to discuss issues in more depth. I highlighted how transportation is a key element in community health, especially for senior citizens. Discussion was also held concerning the importance of good mental health resources. The hospital will take all of the input provided at the listening session and from an on-line community survey to eventually develop a report with action steps.

*Recommendation:* No further action is necessary.

## **J. Town Meeting, By-Laws, and Regulations**

### (1) Draft Affordable Housing Trust Bylaw from Essex Housing Coalition (\*)

At the last meeting, the Board began to review recommendations from the Essex Housing Coalition with respect to the development of an Affordable Housing Trust Bylaw. The Board indicated that additional discussion would be held at the present meeting, in order to give the Coalition feedback in advance of its February 9, 2022 meeting.

*Recommendation:* **Additional Board review of the recommended draft bylaw.**

### (2) Preliminary Draft of Annual Town Meeting Warrant (\*)

At the last meeting, after the Board reviewed the draft Annual Town Meeting article topics list, I indicated that I would put together a preliminary draft of the actual warrant for review at the present meeting, which I have done.

*Recommendation:* **Board review and discussion concerning the preliminary draft of the Annual Town Meeting warrant.**

## **K. Legal Issues**

No items.

## **L. Grants**

### (1) Town Hall Energy Efficiency Grant Scoping Study

As I mentioned previously, the Town Planner and I are working with National Grid to better understand whether the Town could retire old equipment (such as water and sewer pumps) to generate enough savings to be competitive for new energy grants. We are also working together to understand whether additional efficiencies might be realized at Town Hall, even though it was completely renovated in 2017. The Green Communities Grant Program and the Massachusetts Gap Energy Grant Program both pay 100% of the cost for upgrading to more energy-efficient equipment if the projected savings is appreciable enough.

The Town Planner, National Grid, National Grid's energy efficiency consultant, and I toured Town Hall on January 27, 2022 in order better understand the building's systems. The consultant will now work up some estimates on energy savings for various upgrades and scenarios and we will learn within a few weeks if any particular upgrades will be competitive.

*Recommendation:* I will update the Board as necessary.

(2) Regional Evaluation to Improve Water Supply Resiliency Grant (\*)

The Town of Hamilton has received a Water Management Act (WMA) Grant Program grant for just over \$107,000 (total project cost over \$155,000 including local match) to evaluate how area communities could work together to improve water supply resiliency in the future. The grant is administered by the Massachusetts Department of Environmental Protection (DEP), with Hamilton as the lead community and with support from the Ipswich River Watershed Association (IRWA) and consulting engineers at Dewberry. The project's kickoff meeting was held on February 1, 2022 and Selectman Phippen was in attendance for Essex.

The scope of the project builds on the findings of the 2018 WMA report with the primary goal of exploring the feasibility of various alternatives specific to Hamilton and its immediately surrounding communities to increase water supply resiliency and to reduce their dependency on the Ipswich River, particularly in the summer. Major tasks include:

1) Exploring the feasibility of obtaining alternative water supplies from the Salem-Beverly Water Supply Board to supplement the water needs of Hamilton and the participating communities on a regional/seasonal basis. 2) Examining the required infrastructure, interconnections, system hydraulics and water quality/blending issues from augmenting Hamilton and the participating communities with supply from the Salem-Beverly Water Supply Board including possible regionalization of the community water systems. 3) Examining the feasibility of obtaining alternative water supplies for Hamilton and other interested communities to meet 100-percent of their water supply needs, thereby eliminating the need to utilize their wells and treatment facilities at all. 4) Exploring partial regionalization between the Towns of Manchester and Hamilton, and the other interested communities. 5) Exploring the feasibility of and issues associated with sharing and wheeling current and future sources of water to/through Hamilton and its immediately surrounding communities on a Mutual Aid and potentially routine basis. 6) Identifying regulatory and cost considerations for the water supply alternatives evaluated.

Grant personnel will interview Superintendent of Public Works Michael Galli in the near future to discuss the details of possible future interconnections and water compatibility and the Town will provide eight hours of in-kind service as a match to the grant.

*Recommendation:* **Board discussion as necessary.**

(3) Expression of Interest, Community One Stop for Growth Program

Personnel from the Metropolitan Area Planning Council (MAPC) developed a draft of an Expression of Interest (EOI) document for the Town to be able to begin the process of consideration for a second zoning bylaw grant, via the Community One Stop for Growth (OSG) portal. As the Grant Administrator for



Essex on the OSG portal, I officially submitted the EOI on February 4, 2022, after Chairman Preen and Planning Board Chairman Drake also both reviewed the draft document. The Executive Office of Housing and Economic Development (EOHED) uses the OSG portal to understand the needs of Massachusetts communities and to best match those needs up with appropriate grant programs. In our case, the Community Planning Grant seems to be the best match and MAPC personnel will assist us with a full grant application for that grant after EOHED provides feedback to the Town with respect to the EOI that has been submitted.

*Recommendation:* I will update the Board as necessary.

#### **M. Emergency Planning**

No items.

#### **N. Other Items**

##### (1) Town Administrator Leave

I was out of the office, on leave, for a portion of the afternoon on January 25, 2022.

*This report is available at [www.essexma.org](http://www.essexma.org) on the morning after any regularly scheduled Essex Board of Selectmen's Meeting.*