



Town Administrator's Report Board of Selectmen's Meeting of January 22, 2024

Report covers from January 6, 2024 to January 19, 2024

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

A. Town Department Reports/Requests

No items.

B. Computer Systems

(1) OpenGov Permitting Software Users Group Meeting

Now that the Town has had adequate time for users of the OpenGov on-line permitting platform to fully understand the system, it was suggested that all users of the system meet to discuss how to make its use most efficient and effective. Presently, the Town uses the platform for building permit and related trade permits as well as Board of Health permits. On January 11, 2024, a large number of users representing many Town departments (selectmen, building, plumbing & gas, board of health, conservation commission, department of public works, fire department, board of assessors, planning board, and historical commission) gathered to discuss the system. I was in attendance, along with Chairman Pereen.

Generally, everyone from the group was able to provide input on how to improve on the Town's use of OpenGov, including several proposed solutions that will involve collaboration between departments. Action items were generated and we will move forward with the implementation of all of the suggestions.

Recommendation: No further action is necessary.

(2) Setup and Provisioning of Video Redaction Computer

The Police Department maintains a full system related to the capture and storage of body-worn cameras. When video footage is requested by the public or other entities, it is sometimes necessary to redact portions of the video based upon legal allowances. The computer that was supplied by the system vendor for redaction work was not initially operative and had to be sent back to the vendor for an operating system issue. The Police Department received the repaired computer recently and I was asked to configure and provision it so that it can be used for its intended purpose. After conferring with the vendor during the week of January 8, 2024, I was able to get the system up and running.

Recommendation: No further action is necessary.

(3) Procurement of Network Equipment for Centennial Grove Cameras and WiFi

As the Board is aware, the Fall Town Meeting appropriated funding from the Town Technology Fund to run fiber optic lines out to two separate areas of the Centennial Grove. That work has not yet occurred and we expect its commencement in the coming month or two. It is also necessary to purchase equipment that will make the new fiber lines operational and connect them to the Town's network via our switch at the Water Filtration Plant. A collection of fiber optic transceivers and network switches are necessary to get the system up and running and I have made arrangements to purchase the required equipment. Once the fiber lines have been installed and lit up with this new network equipment, I will begin the process of considering the best type of WiFi and security camera equipment that will plug into the network equipment. WiFi will be made available to the public and security camera recording could potentially occur in the police station.

Recommendation: I will update the Board as necessary.

C. Personnel

No items.

D. Procurement/Ongoing Projects

(1) Offer of Sale of Town-owned Properties on Gregory Island (*)

The Board offered for sale in 2023 a total of 12 Town-owned properties in the Gregory Island neighborhood of Essex. Of those properties, three were sold, one was found to not actually be Town-owned, and three were taken off of the market. The remaining five properties had substantial offers made on them but the buyer would only agree to the purchases if the properties if the Board agreed to sell the properties without restrictions. Since the 2023 solicitation had clearly referenced future deed restrictions, the sales could not be completed. The Board then decided to offer those five properties for sale again, without restriction and with substantial minimum offers. Offers on the five properties via this second solicitation were due on January 18, 2024 and no offers were received under the new terms.

Recommendation: **Board discussion as necessary.**

(2) Offer of Contract for Centennial Grove Restroom Facility (*)

Bids for a precast concrete, prefabricated restroom facility for the Centennial Grove were due on January 18 and we did not receive any bids after eight prospective bidders had obtained copies of the bid documents. We were hopeful that one contractor in the region would submit a bid but that contractor dropped out after a staffing shortage discouraged them from making any new commitments.

Recommendation: **Board discussion as necessary.**

(3) Disposal of Council on Aging Vehicle

Back in August of 2023, the Board authorized the disposal of an old Council on Aging sedan that is no longer operative. Unfortunately, neither the Police Department nor the Council on Aging could locate the vehicle's original title (the vehicle was originally a police vehicle). It took many months to work through the process of receiving a replacement title due to an issue with how the Registry of Motor Vehicles had the vehicle listed in its system. The replacement title arrived during the week of January 1, 2024 and the vehicle was sold for scrap value on January 9, 2024.

Recommendation: No further action is necessary.

(4) Advertisement of Public Water Supply Well Improvement Project

The modernization of Essex's three public water supply wells is being financed by the Town's American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA) funding. The project had been scheduled for commencement in the fall of 2023 but a change of personnel at the engineering firm that is designing the project introduced a delay. The design has now been finalized and the Invitation for Bids was released on January 10, 2024. Filed sub-bids for subcontractors are due on January 31, 2024 and general bids are due on February 7, 2024. A site visit for bidders was held on January 17, 2024 (I attended along with Water Department staff and our engineering personnel). I had arranged for the project's advertisement in the newspaper, local posting, the Central Register, and Comm-Buys as required during the week of January 8, 2024.

Recommendation: I will update the Board as necessary.

(5) Commencement of Public Safety Facility Roof & Bldg Envelope Specification

At the last meeting, the Board agreed that the Town should accept the full scope of services proposed by Copeland Building Envelope Consultants, which includes Northeast Roof Consultants as a subcontractor. I have since signed the necessary contract on behalf of the Board and Copeland will soon commence work. The project will specify what needs to be done to correct the roof issue and to deal with siding and trim issues. After specification is complete, I will work with our consultants to package the project for bid.

Recommendation: I will update the Board as necessary.

E. Insurance

No items.

F. Facilities

(1) Annual Senior Center Elevator State Inspection and Testing

The annual State elevator inspection and testing occurred with respect to the Senior Center elevator on January 9, 2024. As the Board may recall, lately, we had been having trouble with getting the elevator to run on generator power. While this was not a problem in past years, it seems that the 2007 elevator system may have aged sufficiently to warrant parts replacement for proper operation. In this case, our elevator contractor replaced the starter for the hydraulic pump motor with a “soft starter” which creates much less of an initial amperage spike when the motor starts up. I had arranged in advance for our elevator contractor, our fire alarm contractor, and our generator contractor to be on site, as required, for the State Inspector. The system passed inspection but the new soft starter may require fine tuning in the future.

Recommendation: No further action is necessary.

(2) Centennial Grove Cottage Power Outage

The recent severe weather cut power to the Centennial Grove Cottage, which is fed via a long utility line that runs through the woods. I reported the outage and National Grid restored power to the facility.

Recommendation: No further action is necessary.

(3) Town Hall Roof Damage

The recent severe weather ripped asphalt shingles off of the top of the bell tower roof. I discussed the damage with a roofing contractor that has assisted us with small repairs in the past and that repair has been made. Also, the roof in the rear of the Town Hall has had roofing adhesive run down the face of the shingles over time during hot weather and has created a minor aesthetic issue. The repair of the aesthetic problem would involve stripping a substantial number of shingles and there is no leakage problem. At this point, I have only requested that the contractor repair the damage to the bell tower roof..

Recommendation: No further action is necessary.

(4) Senior Center Network Reset

The recent melting of a significant snowpack due to warm temperatures and heavy rain caused water to temporarily pool in the Senior Center basement. This type of minor flooding does happen from time to time in that building and a large sump pump is in place to evacuate the water. On this particular occasion, a power supply to a device on the Senior Center computer network had dropped down onto the floor and touched the water. This tripped the outlet supplying power to the UPS device for the network equipment and the Center lost power to the computer network and to the IP-based telephones. I was able to reset the ground

fault protection on the outlet and I have ordered a new power supply for the device in question.

Recommendation: No further action is necessary.

(5) Senior Center Sprinkler System Connection

The connection between the sprinkler main from the street and the actual sprinkler system for the Senior Center has developed a very slow, drip leak. I brought a local plumbing contractor in to determine whether the leak was serious and he suggested that our sprinkler contractor replace certain components. I have contacted our sprinkler contractor to quote and perform the work.

Recommendation: No further action is necessary.

(6) Senior Center Heating System Repair

Lately, the heating system at the Senior Center has not been providing the same level of heat as the building users have been accustomed to. Our HVAC contractor reviewed the matter and found that the burner tubes for the gas-fired furnace have become corroded and require replacement in order to restore the heating system to its full output. The Council on Aging is presently reviewing the proposal for this repair work and will probably elect to move forward with it.

Recommendation: No further action is necessary.

G. Fiscal/Budget

(1) Finance Committee Public Forum “Tax Talk” Summary

I attended the subject forum on January 11, 2024 along with members of the Board of Selectmen and the Finance Committee. The forum featured an in-depth review of how Proposition 2 ½ affects the ability of the Town operating budget to grow along with an overview of the Town’s major budget drivers. The session was recorded and can be [viewed here](#).

Recommendation: No further action is necessary.

(2) State Earmark Funding Mid-Year 9C Cuts

Unfortunately, since the Governor of the Commonwealth decided to make major budget cuts under her “9C authority”, two State earmarks that the Town had been counting on have been cut in half. The \$75,000 earmark for improvements to the Centennial Grove was cut to \$37,500 and the \$15,000 earmark for environmental restoration was cut to \$7,500. The Grove earmark was going to offset a portion of the cost associated with the replacement of the Folsom Pavilion and a new camera and WiFi system. As such, that financial assistance will be more limited. The environmental earmark will probably still continue to assist with the Town’s understanding of the Alewife Brook watershed but less additional work will be possible due to the cut.

Recommendation: No further action is necessary.

(3) Enrollment of Town Natural Gas Supply Accounts with Direct Energy

As discussed with the Board at the last meeting, the Town's four-year, fixed-rate natural gas supply contract with Constellation Energy ended in November and Constellation left the natural gas market. Despite studying a replacement vendor many months before the planned exit of Constellation, global affairs are such that natural gas supply pricing for a successor contract with a new vendor is not presently going to be below our former, fixed-rate. The Town briefly was forced to take the National Grid default supply price while we waited to see if a new vendor could beat that price. After a brief pricing dip in December, we were able to line up a price with Direct Energy (NRG) which is lower than the National Grid default supply price but higher than the favorable pricing that we had under the now-expired contract with Constellation.

As such, with the Board's consent, I have now enrolled all ten of the Town's natural gas accounts under Direct Energy for one year. While this action will help to keep our rates steady and below the National Grid default price, we are still free to monitor the marketplace and we may break the contract with Direct Energy at any time, without penalty, if we find a better deal. We will even be able to break the contract for a lower price with Direct Energy itself if rates drop anytime in the next year. This change in pricing may require some departments to request line-item or Reserve Fund transfers to cover the difference and it will be necessary for all departments to carry higher line item figures for natural gas in fiscal year 2025.

Recommendation: I will update the Board as necessary.

H. Complaints

No items.

I. Meetings Attended

(1) Massachusetts Municipal Association Annual Meeting and Trade Show

I attended the subject event on January 19 and 20, 2024 in Boston. The meeting offered a variety of informative sessions with respect to municipal management and provided great networking opportunities with other municipal officials and with private vendors who provide municipal services.

Recommendation: No further action is necessary.

J. Town Meeting, By-Laws, and Regulations

(1) Draft List of Annual Town Meeting Topics

(*)

I have revised the draft list of possible Annual Town Meeting topics in accordance with the Board's guidance from the last meeting.

Recommendation: **Board discussion as necessary.**

K. Legal Issues

No items.

L. Grants

(1) Zoning Bylaw Review Project Update

The Metropolitan Area Planning Council (MAPC) has continued to assist the Town with a comprehensive review of the Town's zoning bylaws. To date, the zoning bylaws have been reformatted and recodified and certain amendments have been made involving definitions, site plan review, and the introduction of a General Zoning District. MAPC has surveyed the community in preparation for possible institution of specific zoning districts (such as residential) at the Annual Town Meeting coming up in May of 2024.

I participated in a recent project update meeting with Chairman Pereen and learned that MAPC continues to review data submitted by the public with respect to future zoning districts, with residential being the most commented-on place type. Further, MAPC is presently working with the Planning Board to incorporate some of the content from the Board's Special Permit Regulations into an actual bylaw amendment proposal that could complement a district zoning proposal at the Annual Town Meeting in May.

Recommendation: I will update the Board as necessary.

M. Emergency Planning

No items.

N. Other Items

(1) Martin Luther King, Jr. Day Holiday

The office was closed on January 15, 2024, in observance of the subject holiday.

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