



Town Administrator's Report Board of Selectmen's Meeting of Sept. 25, 2023

Report covers from September 9, 2023 to September 22, 2023

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

A. Town Department Reports/Requests

(1) Economic Development Committee Policy Recommendations (*)

I participated in the subject meeting along with the Town Planner on September 18, 2023. The meeting included discussions concerning the Board's proposed mobile vendor and resident sticker policies and the Board's deed research initiative regarding an "owner unknown" parcel off of Southern Avenue.

With respect to the mobile vendor policy, the Economic Development Committee (EDC) supports the Board's present position that mobile vendors are simply not allowed on Town-owned properties. The EDC does not see a need to develop a mobile vendor policy since encouraging mobile vendors such as food trucks is only likely to be detrimental to established businesses in the area.

With respect to the resident sticker policy, the EDC would like to see the sticker fee increase to \$35 next year and feels that anyone who meets the presumptive criteria in the policy should be able to get up to three sticker in their name (provided they have more than one Essex vehicle in their name). This is common for people who perhaps own other vehicles that are driven by children or spouses.

With respect to the deed research initiative, the EDC supports the Selectmen authorizing additional funding for the deed researcher to continue his work.

Recommendation: **Board discussion as necessary.**

B. Computer Systems

(1) Improvement of Town Hall Auditorium A/V System

At the last meeting, the A/V system in the Town Hall Auditorium was not carrying sound from virtual participants across the house speakers. On September 14, 2023, a technician arrived to install a new volume control for the virtual participant feed along with a monitor speaker to allow the Board to better hear virtual and in-room podium participants. I tested the system with the technician before any new components were installed and it worked fine (which probably means that there was some sort of Internet quality or software problem at the last meeting). The new equipment is now in place and the broadcast producer from 1623 Studios will now be able to offer the Board more audio options.

Recommendation: No further action is necessary.

C. Personnel

(1) Possible Shared Conservation Commission Agent Prospect (*)

The City of Gloucester has a full-time Conservation Agent who has some capacity to take on more work. As such, on September 13, 2023, I discussed with the Gloucester Community Development Director the possibility of Essex using the services of the Gloucester Conservation Agent. The Essex Agent position is presently vacant and it has been difficult to retain qualified personnel for only a few hours a week. I had also spoken with the Town Administrator in Georgetown about a possible employee share prospect but the all-in cost (including Essex's share of benefits) was considerably more than our current budget. I may have a figure from Gloucester by meeting time and it will provide a decent basis for whether the Town needs to consider increasing the budget for the Agent position.

Recommendation: **Board discussion as necessary.**

(2) Additional Retiree Health Insurance Offering, Further Discussion (*)

Presently, retirees from the Town of Essex who have reached the age of 65 have the ability to elect one of two retiree health insurance plans. The HMO option, known as Managed Blue for Seniors, is the lowest-cost option and the Town pays 75% of the premium (in parity with the Town share for active employees who have elected the HMO). The PPO option, known as Medex II, comes at a higher cost and the Town pays 60% of the premium (in parity with the Town share for active employees who have elected the PPO).

Our insurance provider, the Massachusetts Interlocal Insurance Association (MIIA) would like to offer a third option, known as Medex Advantage. Like Medex II, Medex Advantage is a PPO and is not constrained by where a retiree chooses to live. The chief difference is that an advantage plan involves the insurance carrier taking the primary risk, instead of the Federal Government (such is the case with Medex II). Allowing the third option to be put in place has no down side to the Town and may actually save the Town a small amount of money, since the overall premium is lower versus Medex II.

If the Selectmen are interested in allowing this third option (at a 60% Town share), the Treasurer will reach out to all of our eligible retirees, offer information and webinar resources, and switch those who elect the new plan over during this year's coming open enrollment period. There will be no obligation for any retiree to make any changes at all and this third option can be revoked by the Town in any new insurance year. At the last meeting, the Board had several questions for our insurer and I have provided the Board with our insurer's feedback.

Recommendation: **Board vote to offer this third retiree health insurance option, at a 60% Town share.**

D. Procurement/Ongoing Projects

(1) Essex River Dredging Project Update Meeting Summary (*)

Senator Tarr organized a meeting on September 13, 2023 involving State personnel and the three owners of the Essex marinas to discuss the recent need to postpone the dredging of the Essex River for one year (moving out to the winter of 2024/5) and the opportunity that may bring for concurrent marina dredging. Selectman Phippen and I were in attendance and the meeting featured a discussion concerning getting the marinas through the necessary permitting in time to possibly “piggyback” on the Federal Channel dredging. While the dredging window (October 1 through January 31) cannot generally be changed due to concerns of environmental permitting authorities, it may be possible to stage the work over two dredging seasons (winters of 2024/5 and 2025/6).

The Army Corps of Engineers is going to seek additional funding for the Federal Channel portions of the Essex River (about \$1M in additional funding is needed) and the Senator suggested that it may be possible to apply for State funding for dredging the areas beneath the slips of the three marinas. With respect to State funding, after reviewing the guidelines for the MA Dredging Program, it does not appear that work in the marina areas is eligible. If we find a way to describe the marina work such that it becomes eligible, that avenue will be explored as well.

Recommendation: **Board discussion as necessary.**

(2) Downtown Lighting Project Update & Subsurface Work Contract Award (*)

Subsequent to the Board’s last meeting, the Town of Ipswich Municipal Light Department indicated that the agency will NOT be able to honor its original commitment to install the lights in downtown Essex after the subsurface work is completed via public bid (due to staffing reductions). We can still purchase and stockpile all materials using the State Contract over the winter and we could find another municipal light department that can conduct the installation, bid the installation out to a private contractor, or possibly use an electrical contractor on the State Contract in the spring. I reached out to the Town of Danvers since Danvers also has a municipal light department but Danvers has similar staffing challenges and will not be able to assist. I am waiting to hear back from the City of Peabody. At the upcoming Fall Town Meeting, a request to fund either assistance from some other community or a private contractor for the pole and light installation; police details; and the actual cost of the lights, poles, and incidentals will need to be put before the voters.

With respect to the award of a contract for the subsurface work, bids were due on September 21, 2023 and we received a total of two bids. The apparent low bidder is Pine Ridge Technologies, Inc. of North Reading, with a base bid of \$211,950 (much lower than the second bidder, whose base bid came in at \$759,050). The low bid is slightly higher our engineer’s estimate of \$180,000 and it does not

appear that we will have the funding to elect the add alternate. Work can commence this fall and needs to be completed by December 15, 2023.

Recommendation: Board vote to award the contract for subsurface street light preparation to Pine Ridge Technologies, Inc.

(3) Request for Proposals for Summer Camp and Youth/Adult Enrichment Svcs.

As the Board is aware, the Request for Proposals (RFP) for the next five years of summer camp and youth/adult enrichment services was developed over the summer and it is now time for the RFP to be released. I have arranged for newspaper, *Goods and Services Bulletin*, CommBuys, and local posting advertising that will all run on October 2, 2023. Proposers will have until 10:00 a.m. on Thursday, October 19, 2023 to submit proposals and the Board will review and rank the proposals beginning with its meeting of October 23, 2023.

Recommendation: I will update the Board as necessary.

E. Insurance

No items.

F. Facilities

(1) Resurfacing of Route 22 in Essex

I met with personnel from MA DOT, the Fire Chief, the Chief of Police, the Superintendent of Public Works, and a paving contractor on September 13, 2023 to discuss a State roadway resurfacing job. Resurfacing work on Route 22 between the Hamilton line and just past Shepard Memorial Drive in downtown Essex began with pavement milling during the week of September 18, 2023. Milling took an entire week and the application of the actual new pavement surface should occur during the week of October 2, 2023. I used the Town's Reverse 911 system on the evening of September 13, 2023 to inform the public about the delays that should be expected during this project. Traffic management has ended up being more complex than originally envisioned since it has been difficult to fill police detail requests. However, no further daytime detours will be necessary and daytime delays will be limited to small crews raising manhole and storm drain structure covers.

Recommendation: No further action is necessary.

(2) Third-Party Assessment of Public Safety Building Repair Needs (*)

As the Board may recall, Copeland Building Envelope Consulting was hired by the Town to assess a number of issues that appear to need attention with respect to the Essex Public Safety Building (even though the building is only two years old). Issues with peeling stain on cedar siding, differential fading of color-matched caulk, separation of PVC batten boards and trim, and other items were assessed

by Copeland using an on-site lift on September 14, 2023. Copeland is in the process of assembling a report based on the data collected in the field and I will bring that information to the Board when available. Copeland did notice a hornets' nest inside the soffit on the back of the building and the Essex Fire Department will use ladders and personnel to review that situation and hopefully eliminate the hornets.

Recommendation: **Board discussion as necessary.**

G. Fiscal/Budget

(1) School Budget Collaboration Group/All-Boards Meeting Summaries (*)

Chairman Pereen, Finance Committee Chairman Buttrick, and I participated in a school budget collaboration group meeting along with school district and Town of Manchester personnel and officials on September 12, 2023. The Board had discussed the Manchester Essex Regional School District budget direction the previous night (at the Selectmen's meeting of September 11, 2023). Generally, the group spent the time on the 12th working out the details of the agenda for an all-boards meeting that took place on September 19, 2023. A detailed summary of the collaboration meeting has been provided to the Board.

At the all-boards meeting on the 19th, members of both boards of selectmen, both finance committees, the school committee, and personnel from both towns and the District had a chance to frame the operating budget issue moving forward. All three entities provided general financial overviews and the two finance committees offered more detailed analysis from each town's perspective. The two boards of selectmen also provided consensus statements. While there were many differences between the positions of the two towns, general agreement was reached on the possible benefit of an operational audit of the District, perhaps finding additional efficiencies in non-instructional costs. The prospect of a "super town meeting" to vote on a FY25 budget that will perhaps be higher than Essex Town Meeting might approve next spring (in accordance with Chapter 71 of the General Laws) is supported by Manchester officials, if necessary.

Recommendation: **Board discussion as necessary.**

H. Complaints

No items.

I. Meetings Attended

No items.

J. Town Meeting, By-Laws, and Regulations

(1) Further Review of Fall Town Meeting Warrant

(*)

I have revised the Draft Fall Town Meeting Warrant in accordance with the Board's guidance from the last meeting.

Recommendation: **Board discussion as necessary.**

K. Legal Issues

No items.

L. Grants

(1) Community Compact Cabinet Best Practices Grant

(*)

At the last meeting, the Council on Aging Director and Council Member Ann Buckley presented a proposal to the Board for an in-depth demographic study of senior citizens and senior needs in Essex. While funding could be sought from Town Meeting, I was asked to determine if the project could be funded through the Commonwealth Community Compact Cabinet Best Practices Program. I reviewed the Age and Dementia Friendly best practices area and it appears that this proposal may be supported by the program as a follow-on to the regional Age and Dementia Friendly Plan that Essex was the lead on a few years ago. As such, I have applied for a grant for the full amount of the proposal (\$35,000) and we should hear from the program soon.

Recommendation: **Board ratification of the application made to the Community Compact Cabinet program.**

(2) Federal Hazard Mitigation Plan Update Grant Quarterly Report

I filed the subject report with the Massachusetts Emergency Management Agency (MEMA) during the week of September 18, 2023 after conferring with our project consultant from the Metropolitan Area Planning Council (MAPC). The project is moving along according to plan.

Recommendation: No further action is necessary.

(3) GAP III Energy Efficiency Grant Quarterly Report

The Town Planner filed the subject report with the Massachusetts Department of Environmental Protection (DEP) during the week of September 18, 2023 after conferring with our project consultant from Weston & Sampson Engineers. The project is moving along according to plan and it involves the replacement of electrically-powered equipment with new equipment that is more energy efficient. Given that the equipment in question is nearing the end of its useful life anyway,

the Town benefits both from the energy efficiency savings and from not having to purchase new equipment with Town funds.

Recommendation: No further action is necessary.

(4) Community Planning Grant Quarterly Report

I am presently assembling the quarterly report for the Community Planning Grant that is assisting the Planning Board with the review of the Town's zoning bylaws. Our consultant (the Metropolitan Area Planning Council – MAPC) will soon invoice us for the past quarter and I will include that information in the reporting documents to the Massachusetts Executive Office of Housing and Livable Communities (EOHLC). As the Board is aware, the Planning Board has been making excellent progress with MAPC and the Planning Board will likely recommend seven zoning bylaw revision articles for Fall Town Meeting. The Selectmen will meet with the Planning Board next on September 27, 2023 to review progress and to coordinate content for the Fall Town Meeting Warrant.

Recommendation: I will update the Board as necessary.

M. Emergency Planning

(1) Federal Hazard Mitigation Plan Update Meeting Summary

The group working with the Metropolitan Area Planning Council (MAPC) with respect to the update of the Town's Hazard Mitigation Plan met again on September 18, 2023. This particular session featured a discussion regarding all of the hazards listed in the current plan that are presently being actively worked on by the Town. The goal of the session was to determine if any of the overall hazard mitigation goals should be dropped or revised and whether developments with respect to any of the ongoing actions require action descriptions to be revised. A number of updates and changes were discussed and the project manager from MAPC will be visiting the Board on October 23, 2023 to host a public hearing related to the update process.

Recommendation: I will update the Board as necessary.

N. Other Items

(1) Town Administrator Leave

I was out of the office, on leave, for portions of the day on September 11 and 12, 2023 and all day on September 15 and 22, 2023.

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