

Board of Selectmen's Annual Report for 2004

2004 has been a year of adaptation and anxious anticipation: adapting to four years of tightening financial times; anticipating tighter times to come. In a sluggish economy we have seen at best flat, and in many cases declining, local receipts and state revenues, and the outlook for the coming years is no better. A very lean FY05 budget was submitted and passed at Town Meeting in May 2004. To achieve this we had to cut discretionary spending, reduce some services, and increase the use of part-time staff to reduce cost of benefits. The Selectmen have made every attempt to provide the best service we can, given the fiscal constraints. Unfortunately, we have been forced to reduce overtime budgets for public safety, defer basic maintenance, cut staff training and hours, and decrease support for some boards. All these scrimpings and changes may not be noticeable to many folks in town, but they are undeniable signs that we are operating with decreased resiliency and increased risks.

In anticipation of continued tight times, the Selectmen, School Committee and Finance Committee redoubled their efforts in 2004 to further refine the town financial model so that we may realistically plan and budget for the coming year. Given the inexorable rise of personnel and other costs, compounded by the failed override at ATM 2003, for FY06 we will again be requesting an override just to keep the current levels of service in place.

In spite of the cutbacks, in many areas the workload has been increasing, adding to the burden of an already very busy staff. The growing town population has raised demands for Town municipal services in all departments, but we have not added new staffing. Our land use and permitting boards have needed more support to process increasingly complex applications. Growth in state and federal requirements on municipal government has necessitated more record keeping, longer procedures, and more complicated reporting. In order to give the staff more time to deal with the workload, this year we reduced public access at Town Hall by closing the doors on Fridays. Due to reductions in overtime budgets, some police shifts were not fully staffed. Heavy equipment maintenance at the highway department has been deferred too long, and our tireless crew now has even more roadway to plow and fields and trails to maintain. Chief Lyons' first-year review has found that additional spending may be required to maintain recommended minimums in the Fire Department.

The Town Administrator, Assistant Town Administrator, and all the Town Hall staff continue to work long hours on behalf of the 22 boards and commissions. Support for the Housing Board has ramped up significantly to help administer the Condo Exchange program, and Summerfields senior housing project. With two more Chapter 40B projects expected within the next year, the demand for Housing Board support will continue to grow. The lawsuit against Boxborough Meadows LLC was settled favorably, resulting in a payment to the town in excess of one million dollars to be used by Boxborough for affordable housing. This significant and successful outcome is due in large part to the excellent professional and paralegal efforts from the Town Administrator's office.

Also in a paralegal vein, during 2004 the Town Administrator's office provided significant research and support to the Board of Selectmen for successful negotiation and conclusion of a Tax Incentive Finance agreement with Interactive Data Corporation, in line with our strategy to foster further business development and increased tax revenues.

Our Senior Tax work-off program continues to be a resounding win-win success, helping to provide much-needed assistance to the permanent staff in support of all departments. During 2004 we had 27 seniors working on a variety of projects, providing about \$11,600 of services to the town at a net cost of only \$6,100. In addition to this economy, they bring a recognized and much-appreciated sense of vitality and community involvement to Town Hall operations. The Selectmen salute our senior workers and thank them for their service.

Following the resignation this year of Alicia Altieri and Stanley Smith, Elizabeth Hughes and Margaret Dennehy were hired for Town Planner and Treasurer, respectively. Prior to hiring the new Town Planner, we worked extensively with the Planning Board, ConsCom, BOH, ZBA, and Housing Board to expand that job description to more fully support the inter-related needs of all of our land-use and permitting boards, as well as the Housing Board. The Town Planner is now the first stop for any applicant dealing with any of those boards, and will facilitate the permitting process for all the boards. Elizabeth will also be working with the Town Administrator to implement the new GeoTMS electronic permit filing and tracking system to improve service and efficiency, reduce overhead costs, and reduce the chance of costly mistakes.

We have begun to plan for much-needed renovations to Town Hall to provide a more efficient work environment for the boards and staff, and improve traffic patterns for public access. A small step has been taken to first relocate the kitchen and lunch area to the alcove off the Grange Hall. This move will also enhance public use of the Grange meeting room for food service.

In order to meet federal requirements for ADA compliant access to a polling place, we redesigned the traffic flow and parking lot around Town Hall. This work was done on a shoestring budget thanks to the ingenuity and thrift of our resourceful DPW. The Selectmen thank the Planning Board and Conservation Commission for their assistance and expeditious processing of the necessary permits.

The Sprint cell tower is now up on the Hager site and producing revenue flow to the town of approximately \$2400/month. As presented at ATM May 2003, it is our expectation that this site will become the preferred location in Boxborough for any cellular provider, thus minimizing the chances that other towers would be constructed elsewhere in town. Additional co-locators on the Sprint tower would increase the revenue to Boxborough. The Selectmen are grateful for the help of all involved in the smooth permitting process and construction coordination with the ongoing work on the adjoining new library building. Once again, our hats are off to the Town Administrator's staff for helping us successfully negotiate a complex contract and lease with Sprint.

Beyond the endless and tireless processing of reports and tallies, filings and forms, our town administration's chief purpose is to support the 22 boards and commissions that are the essence of our Town Meeting government, and our way of life here in Boxborough. The Selectmen wish to recognize and heartily thank all those who have volunteered to serve the town and contribute to its vitality and unique character. In this past year we have seen many new faces and even new residents step forward for service. To them we say welcome and thanks. To those still waiting we say come!

In recognition and gratitude

May 2005 will be a watershed town meeting, but not solely because of the tough budget questions to be decided by the voters. For the first time in the memory of many of us, we will not have the familiar hand and commanding voice and presence of Moderator Reg Brown to guide us through the thickets and underbrush of debate and resolution. After 27 years, Reg is reluctantly stepping down for health reasons.

Mr. Moderator, thank you for showing us how it is done - with decency, fairness, humor, and respect. Godspeed.