

News from the Desk of the Town Administrator

By Stephen Halleran

2008 Town Expenditures/2009 Proposed Town Budget: Reacting back in June to their weekly expenditures to budget reports which were starting to show that as a result of the extraordinarily harsh winter things in the highway department budget were getting uncomfortably tight for early in the year, the Selectboard asked all departments to pull together and to suspend discretionary spending. As a result of that directive, despite the extremely harsh winter and sky rocketing fuel prices for most of the year we were able to complete the 2008 fiscal year without over expending the approved town budget.

Due to the now widely acknowledged economic recession, the Selectboard has been very clear in their stance that the 2009 budget would not raise the town portion of the tax rate. This goal becomes especially hard to achieve when like most municipalities we are experiencing declining revenues and a tax base that has stagnated (not as many new automobiles being registered, fewer building starts). In the end, with the help of department heads and the Finance Committee we were able to accomplish our budgetary goal, but not without cutting some programs and freezing wages and benefits for all town employees and delaying the hiring of open positions. By example, planned progress for the Brook Road reconstruction has been dramatically scaled back. We had hoped to bond for the remaining work and to complete the project in 2009. After consultation with the Finance Committee the collective sense from the group was that this was not the right time to go into debt for something over 1.5 million dollars. Rather, we will continue along the best we can using available town funds and town forces. Morrill Construction, the contractor that did the work in 2008, maybe still used for some of the larger culvert replacements. The ripple effect of this is that it is likely that we will have to push further back the Freeman Road project that was hoped for, but not delivered in 2008. Likewise, using an outside contractor to clear the sidewalks in Plainfield Village was discontinued this year, town forces will perform that work as time allows. The result being a much different level of service than has been provided in recent years.

We continue to make sure our name and projects are included on all the lists for the national stimulus package. However, when you consider the size of our state and Plainfield's comparatively small size within our own state, to plan on the Federal Government providing funding to rebuild our local roads and bridges might be a nice hope, but not a plan we can realistically count on just yet.

2009 Warrant: Not surprisingly, the warrant is pretty thin this year only about a dozen articles. The planning board is not proposing any new zoning changes, however, the board continues to work on future changes in the area of work force housing and regulation of both residential and commercial wind powered electric generators. The workforce-housing piece centers on state legislation, which demands that each community insure some reasonable access to "affordable housing." This is not a brand new issue and in fact our town has adopted zoning changes, which have been designed to expand the available options for those considering doing a housing project. As planned, residential wind powered generators will continue to be easy to obtain permitting for, but will include some basic requirements to reduce any impacts on neighbors. Some of these towers stand more than 100' in height and can have blade diameters of 20' or more. Both of these issues will likely be in front of voters in 2010.

Besides the budget, the only other spending is the annual contributions to capital reserves. The entire budgeting team feels strongly that the reserve funding be kept in place, not to fund them will create significant financial hardships in future years. In short, if we have to cut lets do so in places where we feel the discomfort in the same year as the cut, rather than putting future taxpayers many of whom will be us in a financial hole.

We do have one petitioned warrant article on the warrant. The article concerns having the town direct the Selectboard to discontinue the use of photographs as part of our property assessing records. The Selectboard opposes this article feeling strongly that a photo of the exterior of a building that appears on an assessment card provides the most reliable way for taxpayers to compare and contrast assessments; the old adage that a picture is worth a thousand words. If you want to see if the Town Administrator is getting a deal on his property assessment (you can't see my house from the road) then print my card along with other

similarly assessed cards and using the compiled data including the photo make your own judgment. Sharing the petitioners assumed concern about privacy, the Selectboard has resisted having the assessment records posted on the Internet. In this way our office staff notes and interacts with everyone who is accessing the data. If you want to view what is possible using the world wide web log on to the Lebanon system www.lebcity.com. In short, none of us likes paying property tax, but as long as it is the system we feel strongly that keeping the records as transparent as possible is the best way to insure fairness.

Sullivan Country: As part of our budget hearing, the Selectboard and the Finance Committee met, on January 21st, with members of the County Delegation to discuss the Sullivan County budget deficit. Basically, how it occurred and what is being done to reduce it. Providing a nursing home facility that in many cases is the only viable option for our county's financially strapped seniors is perhaps their most important work, but also their greatest challenge. What we learned is that improper estimating of revenues and a lack of administrative oversight lead to a reported surplus becoming the reality of a \$3 million deficit. The result is that it will take another one or two budget cycles for the county to eliminate the deficit. Expectations are that the county tax will remain at, but not significantly increase over the current rate of \$2.55/\$1,000. This rate includes Plainfield's share of the first one million dollar payment toward eliminating the deficit. The best news from the meeting was that the folks watching over our tax dollars at the county level have, in large part, changed and the new team is fully focused on righting this ailing ship.

Stephen Halleran