

TOWN MANAGER – 2020 ANNUAL REPORT

Please find enclosed the Office of Town Manager Annual Report for the year ending December 31st, 2020. As you will see from the report for 2020, this was a year unlike any other for Exeter and for the world.

The year began somewhat normally as the Town Budget Hearings for FY20 were held in January, and Deliberative Session was held on February 1st, 2020. However, as the year began to unfold, it became more evident that a new virus which originated in Wuhan, China was taking over the mainstream news reports. This virus, dubbed “COVID 19,” would change the course of the year. As January turned to February stories about the impact of COVID 19 were written every day, and it became clearer the virus was going to have a major impact in the United States. How much of an impact was still unknown, as comparatively little was still known about the virus except for the fact it could be deadly, and there was no cure.

As February turned into March, it was clear we would be in for a long and different year than we had ever experienced before. As COVID 19 began to take hold, the question of what state and local officials were going to do became a key issue as the virus was coming into the United States, was spreading, and was going to impact every state in the nation. By the time the Town Election occurred on March 10th, hand sanitizer was being used at the polls, and COVID 19 was here with 5 cases being reported in New Hampshire. By March 13th, the Governor declared a State of Emergency. Local meetings were held at the Town Hall with our Emergency Management team, to determine a course of action with representatives from all local institutions including the public schools, PEA, Exeter Hospital, and our State Senator. Town Offices closed to public access on March 18th while Town services began to be provided using alternate methods.

Through all of this, the Information Technology team worked to implement a virtual meeting system for Town Boards and Committees. The instrument was Zoom, which continues to be used for public meetings as of this writing. The lack of widespread testing was an ongoing issue and many facilities, public and private, began to shut down in an effort to combat the potential spread of the virus. Daily news was covering stories of people that had travelled from overseas; and states, cities and towns all grappled with the early effects of COVID spread in their communities. The State of NH Emergency Management efforts during this early phase were the main resource for the Town to get information and direction, all while Emergency Orders were developed by the Governor’s Office including the Stay at Home initiative. The FFCRA was passed at the federal level, with stimulus checks sent to taxpayers from the federal government, public school children sent home to remote school, and businesses reducing hours and/or closing altogether in the midst of the pandemic.

As April turned into May the Town focused on remote work and how to serve the public in a new way. The doors were closed, but many employees were still on site. All departments continued to function. People were encouraged to use the Town drop box which was put to good use. IT worked long hours restructuring the Town website to emphasize use of services via electronic means. Everyone focused as much as possible on remaining safe while the virus continued to spread in the early few months of the pandemic. Emergency plans were regularly consulted, and the Town worked closely with Federal and State officials on implementation of the CARES Act and FFCRA. During this time new rules were also developed for restaurants and other businesses, under the Governor’s Re-open Task Force. Methods of staying safe within the COVID 19 environment were offered by businesses of all types. Many businesses continued to support work at home policies for their employees. Life continued to be different as people stayed home and conducted their business online.

When the Town Offices finally reopened to the public the first week in July, there were several changes that had taken place within the building. Social distancing markers were put in place, along with COVID 19 warnings regarding symptoms. People were asked to continue to conduct business online wherever they could. Employees began wearing masks during the workday, in common areas, and emphasized the six foot social distancing measures in all operations. Certain buildings continued to restrict public access to the quarters themselves while continuing to serve the public by meeting them outside or in a distanced manner. Hand sanitizer was installed throughout municipal buildings and its use was widely encouraged. The public responded very well to these changes. Schools finished out the year remotely, while many Parks and Recreation programs had to be cancelled, including the closing of the pool for the summer of 2020.

In this pandemic year the Town continued to see changes in personnel. Fire Chief Brian Comeau retired in April 2020. Brian served the Exeter Fire Department for 38 years beginning in 1982. Brian had a long and productive tenure in Exeter and we wish him the best in the future. Assistant Chief Eric Wilking was promoted to Fire Chief in July. Chief Wilking has been with the Town since 2005 and will serve the Town well in his new position. Justin Pizon was promoted to Assistant Chief of Operations, as Chief Wilking implemented structural changes to accommodate the new administration. Other retirements in 2020 included Jim Pittman and Steve Towle from Public Works, Todd Preble from Fire, and Jeff Butts and Michelle Boireau from the Police Department. We wish all of these employees the best in their retirement.

Planning and Economic Development remained busy in 2020 despite the pandemic. The Planning Board had a full workload and met continuously over the year, with the pandemic spurring on many projects including residential development. Economic Development worked hard to implement the federal PPP program, communicate federal funding options to local businesses, and worked hand in hand with Exeter business that needed assistance in an effort to keep the businesses going in the unprecedented COVID 19 pandemic. This year, perhaps more than any other, the Town was extremely fortunate to have our action-oriented Economic Development Director Darren Winham.

Property values held steady during the pandemic in 2020 and even increased as homeowners took the time to improve their properties. Low interest rates and high desirability continued, and Exeter remained a hot real estate market, particularly for residential properties. Overall values increased a little over 1% more from the revaluation increase the year before.

In November, the Town's overall tax rate was set at \$24.49/1,000 of assessed value, an increase of \$1.22 per 1,000 over 2019. The Town's share of the overall rate continued to decrease, as the Town's rate came in at \$5.91 per 1,000, an increase of 20 cents per 1,000 over the prior year, but a reduction in the overall share of the tax burden to 23% of the total amount raised.

Although 2020 was a year the likes of which we've never seen in our lifetimes, the year has ended with two COVID 19 vaccines being approved and a program of implementing the vaccine has started. As I write this, our first responders have received their first dose of a two dose vaccine that is 95% effective. The hope is that as the vaccine begins to take hold, a greater degree of normalcy can return to everyday life coming out of what has been the most turbulent year many have ever experienced. I would like to thank all of our employees who have stuck together through this challenging year, the Select Board, and my Assistant, Pam McElroy. Through all of your efforts we stay strong in the face of these unprecedented challenges, and we will continue to do so.

Respectfully submitted,

Russell Dean
Town Manager