

Town of Merrimack



Long-Range Planning Session Summary Report

May 17, 2013



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Introduction

The intent of the May 17, 2013 session with the Town Council and Senior Administrative staff was to review the progress the Town of Merrimack made over the year on any of the outstanding goals, and to look forward to 2013-2014. Primex³ was pleased to be a part of this process to assist the Town in this important endeavor.

The report is not intended to be a verbatim account of the discussion, but rather to capture these major points and concepts.

Participants

Finlay Rothhaus, Chair
Dave Yakuboff, Sr., Vice Chair
Tom Mahon, Councilor
Dan Dwyer, Councilor
Tom Koenig, Councilor
Nancy Harrington, Councilor
Eileen Cabanel, Town Manager
Paul Micali, Finance Director

The exercise was facilitated by:

Rick Alpers, Member Services Consultant, Primex³

2012 Goal Review Discussion:

The session began with the group reviewing the goals from 2012 and highlighting one goal from 2012 that has been done well. Participants identified the following goals that have either been achieved or are underway:

Goals Done Well

- Library – Meeting held with Library Trustees; some good changes achieved there, and a good end result
- Swap shop removal is under way at the Transfer Station
- Paving was made a priority, with the Town spending more than \$800,000 on paving projects currently

- Some bridges and culverts have been repaired/replaced (but not the ones identified in 2012 Goals)
- Health insurance – The Town settled 5 of 6 union contracts
- Unreserved fund balance – The Town made a \$500K deposit in the unreserved fund balance, and will continue to work on replenishing that fund
- Economic Revitalization Zones (ERZs) – more properties from 2012 are now classified
- The Town has stabilized buildings at Wasserman Park that are able to be stabilized; the next steps for the park are to be determined
- Highway Garage – assessment in progress
- Commitment of volunteers – The group notes an increase in both the numbers and the quality of volunteers, including more younger people, at all committees

Goals – 2013 and Beyond

The group was asked to identify the top priorities currently facing the Town, and to discuss them in descending order. The group identified two infrastructure issues as being top priority: number one being the Public Works Garage, and number two (or, of equal importance according to some Councilors) being the South Fire Station. For the purposes of this report, the Public Works Garage will be listed as No. 1 and the South Fire Station will be listed as No. 2.

Infrastructure

Goal #1: Public Works Garage

The Council members have visited the Public Works Garage to view the conditions there, which were described as run-down and unsafe. Architects have also been to review the site. A subcommittee comprised of Council members, Public Works staff and members of the public has been established to make recommendations as to what is needed for the facility.

The group decided that the best course of action at this time appears to be replacing/rehabilitating the facility on the same location and same land space. Funding for this item is discussed in greater depth under *Budget Planning for 2014-2015 and Beyond* (pg. 7).

Infrastructure

Goal #2: South Fire Station

Some members of the group considered this to be equal priority with Goal #1. The group described the current facility as having numerous safety and access issues. Consensus was to possibly renovate/rehabilitate the current station and turn it into a rescue/ambulance facility, since the majority of the Town's Fire Department calls are for rescue/medical issues, not house fires. The site is also in a neighborhood where an ambulance would be ideally located.

- \$650K from the Mall – given to the Town to cover the cost of anticipated additional equipment for issues related to the Mall, but contract does not specify

exactly how the money needs to be spent; discussion ensued on that topic. Consensus that spending the money at South Station would be appropriate since it follows the same intent outlined in the contract.

The group asked staff to bring back a plan for using the \$650K to renovate the current station as a full-service rescue facility. They noted that they are not committing to the idea, but are doing their due diligence to look into it, with the recognition that the long-term goal is a rescue facility (and not just a fire facility).

Infrastructure

Goal #3: Wasserman Park

Council has done a walkthrough of the Park, and a report has shown that some of the buildings there are unsafe and not code compliant. Demo will be completed on these buildings following this summer's day camp. Other buildings at the Park that are able to be stabilized have been stabilized. The group agreed that they need to decide on the long-term plan for the park, and a large part of that is deciding whether to continue with the summer day camp. Some of the concerns with the day camp were as follows:

- It is a remnant of a "bygone era," and there are now several other camp options from which parents can choose.
- Day camp somewhat limits/discourages public access Monday through Friday, and by ending it, the Town would have the opportunity to transform the park into something that more fully serves the public.
- Higher maintenance costs will continue if the day camp continues.
- Without the camp, the Town could tear down a lot of the cabins, and turn the dining hall into a rental facility/function hall that could generate revenue.

The group agreed that they would like to hold a public hearing to get input on the future of the day camp. Additionally, they have asked staff for a financial analysis of the day camp.

The group also discussed the plans for a dog park, and agreed that the current \$60K quote was over-engineered. The Dog Park Committee has been dissolved. Staff was asked to re-examine state and local ordinances and investigate cost of tree removal, fencing, and weekly cleaning.

Infrastructure

Goal #4: Town Hall Complex

Red House – The Town currently owns this property and the group agreed that it needs to be torn down. Staff was asked to investigate the cost of demolition for this property.

Ambulance Garage – Currently in use for Town vehicles and other property. The group discussed whether this property should be torn down as well, or whether it should just be fixed

up (doors, windows, roof need to be replaced). The group did not make a firm decision on this property yet; listed as a “potential teardown.”

Infrastructure

Goal #5 – Roads and Bridges

The group discussed the current status of Town bridge and road projects.

- McGaw Bridge – Red List; State will reimburse 80 percent when funds become available
- Baboosic Brook Rt. 3 Bridge – Submitted for Red List, trying to combine with Wire Road Project
- Bean Road Culvert – Submitted for Red-List
- Chamberlain Bridge Sidewalk – 2015
- Bedford Road by Reeds Ferry – Brook crossing, engineering has begun since this project is in the current 2013 budget
- Church Street – Town Center Committee will be issuing a report, and the Safety Committee will be involved as well. This was described as a dangerous site.

The group agreed that future discussion will be required regarding creating intersections vs. roundabouts throughout Town.

Infrastructure

Goals #6 and #7 – Sewer Expansion and Library (identified as lowest priority – brief discussion only)

- Sewer Expansion – Not currently a priority
- Library – No plan from the Trustees yet, so no action pending

This concluded the group’s discussion on Infrastructure issues and goals.

Other Goals

Communication

- Resident Survey – Last done by the Town about four years ago; the group discussed whether/how it should be done again. The group agreed that future surveys should ideally be written by a professional third-party at no additional cost, if possible. The group also agreed that using free online survey software (such as Survey Monkey) on an as-needed basis is the best way to proceed with resident surveys. Residents could access the survey from a link on the Town’s web site.
- Web Site – The Town has received a proposal from Virtual Town Hall, a web-development company, which boasts a more user-friendly platform and a client list that includes several other local municipalities. The group agreed that staff should continue

to explore what VTH could offer and work toward moving away from the current web site. They will also ask the Tech Committee for their input as well, including ideas for new strategies in communicating to the public. The group discussed the idea of building an e-mail list by putting a sign-up sheet at Town Hall, and residents could choose to sign up to receive notifications on any topics of interest to them.

Economic Development

- Merrimack Hotel – Potential to be turned into a nursing facility
- Zyla's – The group discussed the idea of working with the current owners to tear down the front building and leave the warehouse – better resale appeal.
- Old Shaw's Plaza – Staff have contacted numerous grocery chains to gauge interest, but developers are not showing any interest in the property.
- Various DW Highway Locations – Numerous updates occurring. Discussion on this area led to discussion of current sewer fees, and the fact that the current \$500K fee is keeping potential developers (including hotels) away. The group decided that they need to revisit the original intent of that fee to determine whether it is necessary, especially if it is discouraging development. Staff was asked to find out the true water capacity of the system, and also to revisit the actual cost of providing services and make sure that fees are lining up in a way that is appropriate and logical for the area. There was also discussion of amortizing the fees in order to soften the blow to potential developers.
- Web Site Listing – The group also agreed to create a list of vacant commercial and industrial property, including a brief description of the property, and put it on the Town's web site to encourage "one-stop-shopping" for potential developers.

Financial Strength/Accountability

- Building Unreserved Fund Balance – \$500K has been deposited, and the group will continue to make deposits as possible. Currently at 2.76 percent of total budget, and the goal is 4-6 percent.
- Budget planning for 2014-2015:
 - Highway Garage – Committee was asked to research and come back with a reasonably priced facility that is well thought out, code compliant and meets all of the department's needs. They must also be prepared to answer and logical questions that the public will have. The Council will propose bonding the project and let the voters decide its fate. Also on the radar: Possibility of incorporating new athletic fields at that location.

- Public Safety Issues – Staff will investigate options for reorganizing the Fire and Police Departments in ways that would save money in each department’s budget.

Quality of Life Issues

- Local Energy Committee – Currently there are no tax breaks offered for using solar/wind/thermal energy (such improvements add significant value to the property). There is current enabling legislation to allow a tax break, but the group wants to explore the idea first. While they support tax breaks philosophically, they have asked staff to provide a financial analysis of how proposed tax breaks would impact the Town before proceeding.
- Athletic Fields – This issue was tabled, but it is on the group’s radar; there are currently several private facilities that allow the Town to use their fields, but staff has learned that this will not continue indefinitely. Group will reconsider the issue next year.
- Wright Property – Currently in the Courts, but possibility for future recreation area
- Milfoil – Naticook Lake and Horseshoe Pond both affected by Milfoil. Participants proposed reaching out to Lake/Pond Associations to offer 50/50 match for cost of management/eradication, likely through public hearing for all those residents affected. Group also considered getting involved in NH Lakes Association Lake Host Program.
- Farmers Market – The market has not grown as anticipated, and vendor fees might be discouraging participation since vendors are not bringing in enough money to offset the fees. Participants agreed that a new location, with more traffic and more visibility, was probably needed in order to keep the Market going. Potential new locations included Watson Park and the old Shaw’s plaza.
- Town Center Trail – Participants agreed that they need financial analysis and overall strategic plan from Town Center Committee; Council is interested in the idea. Town employees will assist as needed.
- GW Stewardship Plan (Greater Woods) - Plan currently before Council.

SUMMARY AND CLOSING

There are numerous self-generated next steps and recommendations throughout the report. These recommendations were derived from the group's discussions around each item listed. This report should be used as guide for the Council and administration to help prioritize long-standing items that need to be addressed. This report will also give guidance to the administration on how to implement some of these decisions.

I would recommend that if each councilor has a binder for each meeting night, then this report should be permanently placed into the binder for reference when some of the issues listed in the report come up for discussion

At some point, you may want to reconvene the group to better prioritize this list. When reviewing the list, it may seem daunting to tackle. With clear direction and prioritization, this list can be accomplished. I am happy to assist in the process if asked.

It was a pleasure to assist you in this important process. If I can help again in the future, please do not hesitate to call.

All the best!

Respectfully submitted,

Rick Alpers
Member Services Consultant