



Town of Winchester

Town Manager
71 Mt. Vernon Street
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October 19, 2021

Dear Madame Moderator and Town Meeting Members,

I am pleased to submit my first report to Town Meeting as Acting Town Manager. I have had the privilege of working for the Town of Winchester for the past 17 years, and have served as Town Engineer since 2010. I was appointed as Acting Town Manager by the Select Board effective October 2nd to fill the opening left by former Town Manager Lisa Wong. I greatly appreciate the opportunity to serve the community in this interim capacity, and look forward to working with members of the Select Board, Town Meeting, Town staff, boards, and committees over the coming months. Our community faces a number of important decisions and challenges as we head into Town Meeting and the FY23 budget season, and I look forward to working together to engage in a respectful public process as we debate the matters before us.

COVID-19 Response

I would first like to acknowledge the hard work of our dedicated municipal and school staff, boards, and committees over the past year and half to manage the work of Town government through the challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic. Since the Spring Town Meeting, our Town Hall, Library, and Jenks Center have safely re-opened to the public, our schools have returned to full-time in-person classes, and capital initiatives and Town construction projects have successfully moved forward. The Health Department and Board of Health remain essential to keeping our community safe and managing the Town's COVID-19 response through community testing, contract tracing, and vaccination efforts. Although this public health crisis will continue to have long-term impacts on Winchester's businesses and families, I am grateful for the resiliency and resourcefulness we have shown as a community to respond to the challenges.

Personnel

Please join me in welcoming several new staff members to the Winchester community. Dr. Frank Hackett was appointed by the School Committee as the Interim Superintendent effective July 1, 2021. Dr. Hackett served as the Superintendent of Schools in Braintree prior to taking the position. Peter Rowe has been hired as the Interim Director of Finance at the School Department, and Mike Towne has been hired as the Town's Human Resources Director. The Town has also successfully filled two positions created at the Spring Town Meeting. Ken Pruitt started in October as the Town's Sustainability Director, and Kristin Romaine began in September as the Town's Mental Health/Wellness Social Worker. We appreciate Town Meeting's support for these important new initiatives.

FY21 Close and Financial Outlook

Despite the challenges related to the COVID-19 pandemic, the Town of Winchester successfully navigated the FY21 budget cycle, which closed on June 30th. In general, property tax revenues met expectations; motor vehicle excise revenue was higher than anticipated due to conservative



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assumptions, but still low compared to pre-COVID years; and other local receipts came in higher than anticipated due to conservative budgeting. The Town received assistance from the FEMA Public Assistance Program and the CARES Act for COVID-related expenses, which helped to increase departmental turn-backs. Finally, the Massachusetts Department of Revenue's Division of Local Services (DLS) certified the amount of available funds, or "Free Cash", as of July 1, 2021 in the amount of \$13,398,331 for the General Fund. The retained earnings of the Water and Sewer Enterprise Fund was certified in the amount of \$1,884,053 and the retained earnings of the Recreation Enterprise Fund at \$245,463. These amounts represent an increase in all cases over the amounts certified for FY20.

Development of the FY23 budget has begun, and several budget summits will be held over the fall and early winter with senior management, and members of the Select Board, School Committee, and Finance Committee. Despite the healthy balance of Free Cash certified for FY21 and a successful \$10 million operating override in 2019, significant financial challenges and structural deficits face the community in the coming years as we balance existing service levels, new initiatives, and maintenance of the Town's AAA bond rating, which is important for future borrowing needs. Budget drivers include: collective bargaining agreements, which expire for all municipal and school bargaining units at the end of FY22; health insurance costs for employees and retirees; school enrollment and special education needs; capital needs; and unknowns as they related to continued COVID-19 expenses. The Town also faces a future override related to reconstruction of the Lynch Elementary School, which will likely come before Town Meeting in Fall 2022 with a vote on the ballot in early 2023 (FY24 tax bill impact).

Existing Capital Initiatives and Construction Updates

- Winchester voters approved a \$12,760,000 debt exclusion override in spring 2021 to support funding for construction of the last flood mitigation project (Project 10) to increase capacity of the culvert under railroad tracks near the Muraco School, and for the design and construction of immediate repairs to the Muraco School Elementary School (roof, boilers, and electrical).
 - Design is currently underway on the culvert project, roof, and electrical repairs; and the new boilers at the Muraco School are expected to be installed in late 2021.
- Construction is underway on Flood Mitigation Project 8 – Swanton Street bridge improvement to increase the hydraulic capacity at the bridge. The project was delayed due to significant precipitation this summer, and work is expected to be substantially complete by mid to late November.
- The contractor has been selected to construct improvements to the intersection of Church Street and Waterfield Road, and work is scheduled to start in Spring 2022.
- The North Reservoir Dam and Lake Street bridge projects will be bid in late 2021/early 2022, for a Spring 2022 construction start.
- The Town successfully completed Year 3 of our requirements under the USEPA's Municipal Separate Storm Sewer System (MS4) program in June 2021, including the adoption of updated stormwater regulations. We are currently working on Permit Year 4 requirements.



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- MassDOT is currently completing improvements under the Safe Routes to School (SRTS) program around the Vinson-Owen School, including installation of a new traffic signal at Johnson Road and Ridge Street.
- The architect for the Lynch School Feasibility Study is expected to be under contract by early November.
- The MBTA bid the Winchester Center Station renovation project this past summer and expects to award a contract in November, with work to start in late 2021 or early 2022.

Eversource 115kV and 345kV Construction Updates

Eversource continues to make progress on construction related to the 115kV transmission line project, which runs between Everett and Woburn. Construction on that project is expected to be substantially complete in 2021, though some additional construction activities may stretch into 2022. Construction on the 345kV transmission project (Woburn to Wakefield) has also begun, and is expected to continue at least through 2022. The Town successfully negotiated a payment of up to \$200,000 from Eversource related to the 345kV line for transportation-related improvements in the impacted area, as well as reimbursement for Field Engineer services for both projects to assist the Town with oversight.

We appreciate the support and engagement of Town Meeting members as we move forward with Fall 2021 Town Meeting. Please note that there was a typographical error in the printing on the cover of the Town Meeting warrant sent out in mid-October. The start date should read “Monday, November 1, 2021”, not Thursday.

Additionally, please note that the Town Manager’s hearing on the warrant articles is scheduled for **Wednesday, October 27th at 6pm** via remote participation.

Sincerely,

Beth Rudolph, PE
Acting Town Manager