

Annual Report for the Town of Durham, NY

April 2021

The 2020 Durham Comprehensive Plan mandated that each year, the town should publish an Annual Report describing what Durham achieved during the prior year, and what is planned for the coming year.

This document is the first Annual Report. It is actually made up of three reports – one from the Town Supervisor, one from the town Highway Superintendent, and one from the Chair of Durham Connect, which is the committee set up to help implement the Comprehensive Plan's recommendations.

The Comprehensive Plan also mandated that the town should hold an Annual Meeting to present the Annual Report and to receive feedback from residents. The first Annual Meeting will be on Saturday June 5 at 10:30 am at Brandow Park. All Durham residents are invited. There will be free refreshments and a raffle with free tickets.

Town of Durham report

By Shawn Marriott, Town Supervisor

The pandemic affected the town's day-to day-activities, most notably for the public. Only one person at a time was allowed to come into the building, and they had to remain in the foyer. We had some people working in the building and a few working remotely at home. Pretty much everything was being handled over the phone or by email.

We only had one possible exposure among the town employees, which ended up with a negative test result. But we did shut the building down and have it sanitized. Apart from that, and other sanitizing expenses, the costs to the town were minimal.

The biggest change was in the way we conducted our twice-monthly public meetings. Initially we used a free telephone-based conference software that allowed people to call in to the meeting. Later, we moved to a video conferencing service which is part of a Microsoft package that town employees were already using. We also started using a cloud service to allow all documents and information from the public meetings to be available on the Internet. We managed to get a big discount on that so it's only costing \$25 a month.

There's no question that in-person meetings are preferable to remote meetings. There is a different dynamic. Maybe it's old-school to feel that when you have somebody in front of you, you can see them and hear them better, but in my opinion it is the best way.

But it's also true that the new format encourages more people to attend. In years past, we would always have the same 10 to 20 people at a meeting. Now, we've had virtual meetings with as many as 50 or 60 people. If someone is out of the area they can still listen in, and people can view the meetings later because the recording is available on the website.

Even after we're back to in-person meetings we will definitely continue to have some kind of remote option. Just what it will be is still in discussion. I can control things better with the telephone conferencing but people want to see, not just hear. At some point we'll want to have video equipment and better sound equipment so we can have our own video feed.

We'll also keep the cloud option, for transparency and also because it's simpler for people to search and find things on their own. This also alleviates some of the workload for the town clerk.

Some of these things I think we would have done anyway, but the pandemic brought them into the spotlight a little more. Unfortunately, everything costs money. Even if in the end it saves money, in the beginning there are costs.

The pandemic made broadband even more of a priority than it was before. At the moment it's one of the most important things that we're trying to do. Internet used to be a luxury; now it's become a necessity. One example is our kids: My daughter used to learn in school, but then, with Covid, the schools were doing everything remotely. I don't know that we're going to go back to doing everything in person, so there's more need than ever to have good Internet.

I've been in contact with Mid-Hudson Cable, the town's Internet provider, with whom we try to have a good relationship. We're also trying to support the Comprehensive Plan committee that's looking into Internet options. I'm very optimistic. Mid-Hudson recently sent out a list of almost 15 miles which will have Internet capability within the next year. One of the projects on Sutton Road is already underway. Some residents agreed to pay to have service extended to their homes and Mid-Hudson is adding capability even beyond that. In the case of the other planned projects, I don't believe Mid-Hudson has any funding from residents. If a member of the community has the ability to pay, it's helping out other families and I'm grateful to those residents.

Mid-Hudson's primary reason for starting these projects was the fact that Central Hudson, the utility company, was changing to new telephone poles, which is what Mid-Hudson runs their services on. Central Hudson also had various tree companies clearing trees around all of their lines. So it meant less out-of-pocket costs for Mid-Hudson Cable.

The other big change brought about by the pandemic is the influx of new people. Whether or not that's a good thing depends on how you look at it. I think every community has struggled with growth. Some embrace it and some despise it. And I think Durham despises it. Despise is a strong word but I think it's accurate; the issue is very polarizing right now.

I was born and raised here. I like a quaint small town. That's why I stayed here. You have people saying now that we've got so many newcomers that it's going to turn the town into something else.

There are people who are definitely against anybody new coming into the area. And you also have people who are absolutely for it and encourage it, maybe because they've done it themselves –although we have people who moved here from the city years ago who don't want anyone else to do what they did.

Property sales have gone through the roof, and sales prices have dramatically increased. I think within the next few years we're going to see a change in the value of everyone's houses—partly because the data collection will be completed for new assessments and partly because sales prices have increased. But that could be a good thing for current owners: For example, if taxes

remained exactly the same and we had 10 new houses that went onto the tax rolls, the new owners would pay their portion of the taxes and other owners' portions would decrease.

The changes also have other implications. Durham has always prided itself on not having zoning, and on allowing people to do whatever they want on their own property. The majority of the town is not in favor of zoning. But the number of second-home owners could go up. [An estimated 40 percent of properties in town are second homes.] What happens then? We don't know. The majority could become the minority.

Some people don't like what other people are doing with their property and want the town to just say no. Unfortunately, it doesn't work that way. We have to follow the legal process, we have to do things fairly, and we have to do things responsibly.

From a town supervisor perspective, and looking at it fiscally, families coming into the area and buying homes that were previously not lived in, or buying new homes, mean jobs—from people plowing snow to mowing lawns to building houses. And, we're increasing the population to the point where Mid-Hudson, which used to say, "Hey, we can't increase Internet because there aren't enough houses," is recognizing that now we have enough houses. Another possible benefit: If we get enough kids living here we may be able to say that we have enough demand to have an elementary school again. Cairo-Durham school district sold the Durham elementary school building for \$1 to BOCES [a New York State education program] to have their heavy equipment classes and a few other classes there. But in the contract with BOCES it says that if they ever decide to sell the building, we would have the right to buy it back for the same price. So it's at least a possibility.

Looking ahead to developments this year, the tax assessor is working on a town-wide reassessment, and right now she is revaluing the town's commercial properties including GlaxoSmithKline. [Editor's note: GSK planned to shut the plant it owned on Route 145 in 2010 but reversed its decision after county authorities came up with a PILOT—payment-in-lieu-of-taxes—plan.]

Currently GSK is paying a frozen amount of taxes that was established in 2011 at the beginning of the PILOT program (originally about one-third of what they would have paid without PILOT), with the exception of the special districts, including fire and ambulance, for which they pay 100 percent of their assessment. The current assessed value of GSK's property is just under \$33 million, based on values established about twenty years ago. And they have put up additional buildings since then. The current total assessed value for the whole town is close to \$267 million.

PILOT for GSK is supposed to end at the end of this year. The town has minimal say in PILOT programs, which go through the Industrial Development Agency and the county. But the IDA says that it has never done a second PILOT program with anybody.

I'm optimistic, but I'm not going to depend on it.

Durham Highway Department report

By Joe van Holsteyn, Highway Superintendent

The main impact of Covid when it started last March was the uncertainty. The second thing was that we had to go to 50 percent of us working at a time. The governor wanted to have people working from home, but you can't work from home in this kind of job.

So for the first six weeks, when it was still plowing season, I divided the crew into two groups. That way, if someone was in contact with someone with Covid we didn't lose the whole crew. Fortunately, no one got sick, then or later.

After that period, we went back to the full crew working together in the garage, where we do all the maintenance work, but we practiced social distancing. Everyone kind of watched out for everyone else. Now we are all working on getting vaccinated. The guys are very aware that it's better to get out ahead of the virus and be preventative.

There were also problems with supplies during the early part of Covid—a lot of little stuff that meant that a simple project that normally would take one or two days would take a week. We didn't know how much state money we were going to get for road improvements; initially they cut us 20 percent in CHIPS, the major program, but late in the year three-quarters of that was restored, after construction season was over. Our total state assistance is normally about \$179,000 for the CHIPS program. PAVE-NY and the EWR program together are \$75,000. But that is not guaranteed funding. The town gives us close to another \$200,000 to maintain roads.

That might sound like a lot of money but just as one example, paving one mile of road costs about \$100,000. Blacktop prices are related to oil prices; last year blacktop cost \$78 a ton. Diesel right now costs us about \$2 a gallon. In February, when we had a lot of snow, we used almost 4,000 gallons.

In the end we had a really good summer and got all our planned road projects completed. Those included paving the top end of Cornwallville Road, which completed a three-year project. (I break up big road projects into several years because otherwise one project could get all the money and the rest of the town, which includes 79 miles of roads, would get nothing.) We also oil-and-stoned several roads, replaced the culverts that needed it, and continued our project on Allen Teator Road, which involved putting down a base blacktop. We will put a topcoat of oil and stone to seal it.

We also repaved the pavilion at Brandow Park and installed new playground equipment. We try to do everything we can in-house, rather than hiring outside contractors, to save the town money. We also do all of our own maintenance, which keeps costs down.

Our biggest purchase this past year was a new snowplow, which cost \$239,000. My plan is to have it doing front-line work for about 15 years and then to use it for a while longer as a spare truck.

There was one resignation of a highway employee this year and we hired one new employee last year, whose job in the summer was to water the flowers in the hanging baskets along the main roads and mow the lawn in the two town parks and the cemeteries. The town is responsible for over 20 cemeteries and it takes a lot of time; you can't use today's big mowers because there isn't room between the graves so it means a lot of weed-whacking.

For the coming year we plan to continue several of our three-year projects and do our regular maintenance. One big thing we do every year is regrade the dirt roads. That's an art in itself. We have 14 miles of unpaved roads.

We're waiting to hear about state funding before deciding on major projects; I don't plan on anything until I hear how much we're getting. Our docket for this year includes repaving Sunside Road and paving Cochrane Road from County Route 20 to the bridge after Cunningham Road.

The Town of Durham Highway Department is proud to serve the Town of Durham residents.

The Highway Department account for roughly half of the town's total budget this year, or about \$1.2 million.

Durham Connect report

By Joan Breslin, Chair of Durham Connect and town board member

The Durham 2020 Comprehensive Plan was created to guide Durham's development over the next five to ten years. It was the result of two years of work by a committee of Durham residents and town board members, and was based in part on significant community input.

Durham Connect is an initiative that the town board set up after adopting the plan in June of last year; its purpose is to help implement the plan's recommendations. There is a steering committee consisting of a Chair (from the town board), a Deputy Chair (from the community), and the community-based convenors of five working groups. Each convenor works with a group of volunteers who focus on implementing one of the Plan's main recommendations. More volunteers will be very welcome.

The plan's summarized recommendations, and Durham Connect's achievements over the past nine months in implementing them, are as follows.

- **Improve Communications:** *Recommendation:* Find new ways to inform residents of community developments. These should include significantly enhancing the town's website, publishing a town newsletter, publishing an annual report, and holding an annual town meeting to present the annual report and receive feedback from residents.

Working Group achievements: The first issue of the twice-a-year town newsletter Durham Courier was mailed in November to Durham's 1,800 property owners. The town's first annual report has been compiled and will be discussed at the first annual town meeting on June 5. Improvements to the town website are being worked on but are not yet ready for implementation.

- **Increase community activities:** *Recommendation:* Organize and encourage a range of community activities. These activities should include providing community meetings, classes and sporting activities; encouraging a local resort to permit Durham residents to use its swimming pool; encouraging the provision of trails in Durham that can be used for hiking, biking, etc.; organizing a farmers' market; and more.

Covid has thus far made it impossible to achieve these results. We hope for more progress over the coming year.

- **Enhance economic development:** *Recommendation:* Work with local business leaders and organizations for the development of a critical mass of retail, restaurant and other businesses within Durham. In particular, encourage the provision of a medical facility within Durham.

Working Group achievements: A flu-shot clinic took place in Oak Hill on October 3. A proposal is being developed to improve online access to information on starting a business in Durham and on building-code requirements.

- **Advocate for improved broadband:** *Recommendation:* Work for fast, reliable and affordable broadband internet service that can be accessed by every residence and business within Durham. Work also for improved cell phone service.

Working Group achievements: In December, a free WiFi hotspot was set up in the town barn parking lot that can be accessed 24/7 by multiple simultaneous residents. A report with detailed findings and recommendations regarding broadband availability within Durham is due for presentation to the town board during the spring or summer.

- **Improve historic preservation:** *Recommendation:* Encourage the development of a unified approach to historic preservation.

Working Group achievements: Plans are being developed to clean and repair Durham cemetery headstones. Data is being compiled for enhanced history pages at the town's website.

- **Administer Durham Connect:** *Recommendation:* Seek and administer donations from governmental agencies, foundations and Durham residents to support the implementation of these recommendations. As necessary, establish and operate a nonprofit organization to facilitate this.

This working group has only just been established.

We actively encourage more Durham residents, both full-timers and second-home-owners, to participate in this important work. There is a need for people with specific skills – an accountant, a website designer, a print layout designer, a proposal-writer, a history researcher, a newsletter-writer, a community events organizer, a sports team leader, a medical facility planner, a farmers' market organizer, a local business outreach person – as well as people whose biggest strengths are enthusiasm and a desire to contribute. To find out more, please contact Joan Breslin, Durham Connect Chair (breslinj@crcsd.org) or Bernard Rivers, Durham Connect Deputy Chair (bernard.rivers@gmail.com).