

**November 2020**

**To: The Town of North Smithfield**  
**From: Town Administrator Gary S. Ezovski**

**RE: Actions and achievements 2016-2020**  
**including recommendations for the future**

During my 2016 to 2020 tenure as the town's administrator I take pride in saying we have taken many steps forward. And by "we", I mean the town which includes every citizen, town employee, and appointed or elected officials. Though some of us may have significant roles, it is only by working together that we accomplish, and I think that is what "we" have done. In these pages I want to identify some of our accomplishments while at the same time recognizing some work we still have facing us that must be managed soon.

### **Personnel matters**

One of the first things to do in December 2016 was the need to manage some personnel changes. We have hired talented personnel to meet community needs in the following leadership positions: Planner, Finance Director, Assessor, Deputy Assessor, Police Chief, Town Clerk and Administrator's Assistant. All have added to the resource that the staff is to the town. Members of the finance staff have also been encouraged to step into management of IT resources that are now provided by a well qualified outside service. While engaging new people and endeavoring to encourage people already with us, we adjusted compensation to levels that respect the talented people we employ and to maintain competitiveness in the marketplace. Along the way we also required that healthcare contributions by staff increase substantially to levels closer to that of the private sector while overall compensation changes have been held to limits that respect the changes in cost of living. In our collective bargaining contracts, we have worked to clean up simple things like confusing language while also addressing the toughest issues of concern to personnel in effort to encourage productivity, job satisfaction and cost efficiency.

### **Facilities**

It took longer than the hopes of anyone involved but we supported the construction process to convert the Kendall Dean school into our new town hall. We also supported the school department's work to add rooms to NSES, renovate portions of NSHS and improve critical elements of each school's HVAC systems. We replaced or made substantial upgrades in roofing at the St Paul St fire station and the Memorial Town Building. We also managed to get the Memorial Town Building's exterior repainted to preclude deterioration of an iconic structure. We have started down the path to determining what should happen next with our former Halliwell School property.

### **Public Safety**

Though there are some who disagree, I have been consistent in my message that the town needs a real police station to assure neighborhood safety, provide proper support for personnel and efficient use of taxpayer dollars. I have not been able to accomplish that goal but remain convinced a new facility at the same location is the only practical, sensible, and cost-effective way to assure that we have appropriate resources to manage public safety. Our police officers are professionals who deserve a modern police

station to perform their extremely challenging work. We have worked to fund more and more training and education. We have financed replacement of radios to insure effective emergency communications. In one of our most successful ventures we redeployed two of our personnel to be school resource officers. And we were diligent and determined to find the right person to succeed our very successful Chief Reynolds and were fortunate to have the interest of our own Tim Lafferty to capably and confidently step into those shoes.

From day one we have been focused on getting our fire department the equipment it needed to provide all services. Having fire and rescue trucks towed for repair as often as was taking place in early 2017 had to stop. Three of four front line trucks have been replaced, and a future funding plan has been established to assure that tow truck dependence will not recur. All self-contained breathing apparatus has been replaced and a program is in place to regularly replace turnout gear. We supported the independent company that is NS fire as it transitioned leadership from the highly respected and accomplished Chief Joel Jillson to our ambitious and experienced new Chief David Chartier. Radio communications equipment has been replaced to improve both the clarity of each message and coverage across the town. In that regard attention has also been drawn to the need for investment in the Woonsocket Hill Road tower that is a vital communications link for the town and the region. Planning for that improvement will take time but it has started and must continue. These quite old and out of sight facilities need maintenance and investment to keep them functional and to protect them from vandalism.

With the relocation of all town offices to 83 Greene Street, we have created opportunity to have a real Emergency Operations Center where key leaders can assemble and act with the resources needed to manage disaster conditions. At the same time, our Emergency Management Agency has been afforded appropriate space and locations where training can take place. Efforts are still ongoing to update and relocate many EMA supplies to locations where they are most accessible and useful when needed.

### **Municipal operations**

Over the last four years our town's comprehensive plan was updated. Because we were fortunate to engage an ambitious and skilled planner that work was accomplished without the expense of outside consultants and our planning process has been managed with clarity and efficiency. Our finance office has worked with budget committee volunteers to manage town affairs with deliberate actions that have yielded great return from cash on hand. Controls have been established that have resulted in very clean audits and substantial surpluses in each year. Our team in the clerk and building inspection offices have initiated several actions that make more of their services available online to increase their productivity and that of their customers. Whether it is on a weekend or the regular workday, our water and sewer departments continue to meet every need and provide certainty that water and waste all flow in the proper direction every day. Our Information Technology systems are not bleeding edge but they are modern and well maintained. Our Town Council members now have town furnished laptops to manage their town documents and communications. The new Town Council Chamber has been equipped with sound and video equipment that will provide all present to see visual presentations and hear every conversation during a council meeting as well as have ability to push the meeting video out to TV.

## **Utilities**

In late 2016, chemical impact to groundwater nearby Mechanic Street had been known for fourteen years. We took hold of that problem and managed an extension of the Slatersville Water Company system with a grant of about \$900,000 and a \$500,000 loan to bring clean water to the area. In the process of pursuing that extension an electronic model of the Slatersville Water Company system has been established that will be an important tool in future system considerations. We also extended a sewer line in Slatersville to about 30 properties in an area where stormwater testing has shown impact by bacteria. Sewer department financial resources were used to fund the work and avoid borrowing. We drew attention to the condition of water supply piping in the Union Village area but have been unable to muster the resources needed for the inevitable need to replace up to two miles of undersized pipe soon. That area receives water supply from Woonsocket, but Woonsocket leadership, with DPUC support, has made it clear over several decades that it will not fund replacement of lines that it does not own and it will not take ownership of undersized or deteriorated lines. Finally, at the northern end of town, evaluations made in the last two years make it clear that the Slatersville Water Company's storage tank on Comstock Road needs major maintenance that could cost up to \$2 million. Funding that project is a challenge that could have been avoided. This Administrator maintains that revenue from the cell antennas that were placed on that tank near 30 years ago was directed to the general fund instead of the Slatersville Water Company where it more appropriately belonged. Subsequently, the town realized a large cash infusion when those leases were sold near twenty years ago. Again, that revenue did not stay with the water company. Consideration to return some or all that funding should be given by future leaders. Whatever happens in that consideration, the cell antenna leases will be expiring in a couple of years. Hopefully, there will be interest by current or future communications companies to extend those leases or establish new agreements. It is important that the same mistake is not made twice. The revenue from any new leases should become an asset and revenue of the water company which operates the system including that tank to substantially reduce the financial burden that the tank renovation will be to the Slatersville system water users. Lastly, in terms of utilities, we have worked diligently to build a relationship with National Grid to optimize their efforts in removing trees that are a risk to our power supply. In so doing we reduced the town's cost of those activities as so many oak trees have succumbed to impact from gypsy moth infestation. Without a doubt we are all frustrated by each and every power outage but working cooperatively with the state's only provider of power to constantly tackle tree risks must be the way forward.

## **Roads**

Reconstruction of the town's 66 miles of roadways must be funded in the town's annual budget process. To do so requires a consistent funding stream of about \$800,000 per year to accomplish two miles of work every year. Up to the time that COVID struck my administration encouraged a start down that path and in fact will have accomplished resurfacing of almost three miles in the last two years. That effort absolutely cannot die as administrations change. Another roadway matter has started this year where we believe our respectful persistence in proposing ideas for change was a catalyst to RIDOT's recent declaration that Route 146 would be rebuilt including a bridge at the Sayles Hill Road intersection. My recommendation to depress the high-speed lanes under the intersection and the rotary concept that Planner Kravitz conceived perhaps helped RIDOT to recognize that something could and must be done. That work will take a few years to complete but any journey starts with the first step. The recent kickoff of the project in the showroom of Anchor Subaru was encouraging. As I said at

that event, for many of us, this isn't just about traffic delays. For many it is personal due to the damage, injury and death that has been realized in this dangerous stretch of roadway. Finally, it is this administrator's opinion that our numerous roadway drainage issues across town continue to be managed only when they reach emergency condition. The ability of our town to address these issues in a more programmatic basis can only occur if engineering resources are brought into our DPW.

### **DPW Facilities and Equipment**

Both replacement and major repair strategies have been used to sustain the quality and performance of the equipment that we rely upon for critical operations. Where possible, to the credit of DPW personnel, engines and transmissions in heavy equipment have been rebuilt or replaced instead of purchasing new. At the same time, we have targeted replacement of both light and heavy vehicles as required to be certain that performance is optimized for both day to day and heavy storm events. We have established a long overdue but first ever Spill Prevention Control and Countermeasures Plan to assure hazmat risks are understood and response methods are known and in place at the DPW. We have also established a program of proper disposal for all waste materials. In that process we consolidated and upgraded the storage vessels for multiple fuels and lubricants. A contract has just been awarded to upgrade multiple features of the DPW's above ground fueling facility that will bring the system into regulatory compliance and sustain it for a substantial period. Finally, a groundwater quality problem at DPW related to petroleum releases of perhaps thirty years ago has been acted upon in effort to cease wasting money on never ending sampling programs. There is now expectation that the matter can be closed in the next year or so.

### **Environmental matters**

On our town property and those of others we have pursued issues that had existed for a long time with interest to make any progress that was possible. At the LR&R superfund site, we pressed EPA to move forward with action to remediate low level chemical concentrations that over time have been migrating toward drinking water wells of properties on Pound Hill Road. As EPA has announced, that action is to start soon. At the Stamina Mill site, I have made it a priority to try to get the dilapidated office building demolished and, at long last, that should indeed be happening soon and at no cost to the town. At Cherry Brook with Planner Kravitz leading the way we have started a detailed investigation for identification of options to eliminate the flooding that takes place on or near Lapre Road and Meadowbrook Drive properties. At the DPW facility we removed soil impacted by spillage at the town's former waste oil collection location and we have taken action to eliminate groundwater impact from fueling facilities that had been removed decades ago but where residual impact was still present.

### **Historic buildings**

We have encouraged the work of the volunteers who are our Heritage Association and Historic District Commission by providing seed funding that they have used to pursue grant funds that have been used to repair a major structural problem at the Forestdale School House and enable the recent engagement of a contractor to begin major renovation of that building's exterior. And, as very recently announced, the Heritage Association has agreed to lease the Memorial Town Building which served as our town hall until May of this year. It is our mutual determination to see that iconic structure sustained as a place where important pieces of the town's history can be displayed and appreciated for decades to come.

## **Open space**

Two properties have been purchased over the last three years without borrowing. Land on Main Street in Slatersville at the entrance to Pacheco Park will accommodate an improvement in the access to the park, provide more parking and enhance the quality of the town's largest non-school recreation facility. We also have purchased the more than 100-acre Souza property on Old Smithfield Road at an affordable and respectable price that will preserve water resource protection while enhancing other open space already owned by this town and the City of Woonsocket.

## **Schools**

In my tenure as Town Administrator I have proudly worked with the school committee leadership and the superintendent of schools with interest to accomplish our mutual goal of assuring that our students continue to receive the outstanding education experience for which the town is widely known. We have demanded that budgets be responsible but at the same time worked to be sure funding is appropriate and facilities are well kept. Collectively, we have produced results while sustaining an amicable relationship.

## **Economic development**

Balancing the conflicting yet mutually dependent interests of residential, commercial, and industrial needs is a never-ending challenge for every community. Too much or too little of any one can be detrimental to the community near and far. A key component of our work in this arena has been to encourage creation of new access to our largest area of existing undeveloped industrial land along the 146 corridor. That effort can advance the vision created by prior redevelopment efforts for up to one million square feet of business buildings on the industrially zoned land in Branch Village. The roadway that is needed to make that land attractive to industrial users may also prove to be a means for resolving the daily backup of traffic in Branch Village. If this roadway effort is sustained, there is opportunity to grow new jobs for the town and region, beneficial future tax revenue, and improved traffic conditions.

## **Financial condition**

Over the last four years we have managed the Town of North Smithfield's financial position with focus on both short and long-term conditions. We have taken interest in the control of spending and demanding value while also considering the tax rate instead of the more common uber focus on just the tax rate. We have worked through some substantial losses of revenue while accomplishing substantially lower growth in spending than the six years prior to this administration. Early on the finance team and I worked diligently to negotiate an agreement with National Grid to manage a staged reduction of their tangible tax obligation after they had realized an error in the values assigned to tangible vs commercial real estate property. Essentially, Grid agreed to continue overpaying their tangible tax to avoid dropping the town into financial chaos. Beyond that, in the long term the transition of tax base from tangible to real property will result in higher long-term payments to the town. In the midst of challenging conditions such as that posed by Grid and other substantial tax revenue losses we were still able to accomplish a major increase in the town's fund balance which accomplishes compliance with recommendations of government finance officials nationwide and secures a favorable bond rating position in an important factor over which the town has complete

control. Along with that achievement we also have established a fund to work toward meeting our Other Post Employment Benefit obligations as is also now expected of responsible municipal entities. Part of our effort to sustain our financial position also includes managing legal challenges that existed before my administration and any that developed over the last four years. Each time we have taken a path of working to resolve conflict rather than funding expensive efforts in court. Finally, to gain a foundation for rational consideration in current and future tax rate deliberations, at my recommendation and with town council support, we engaged the RI Public Expenditure Council to perform a study of the town's tax structure which can be a valuable tool for those conversations well into the future.

## **Conclusion**

Over the past four years, we have worked to provide the normal and highly visible elements of public safety, schools, snow plowing, paying bills, collecting taxes, trash removal, maintenance of buildings or parks, etc. But there has been action taken on many, many aspects of who and what we are that are naturally lesser known but perhaps should be more widely understood because there is much more to being a town than public safety and snow plowing! And, as stated above, there is more to do. Access to our existing industrially zoned land must be accomplished. We must get our police an appropriate facility, we need to address deteriorating water lines in Union Village and recondition our Comstock Road water storage tank. We have to continue regular and predictable replacement of fire and rescue trucks, and we must maintain and add to our recreation resources.

North Smithfield is a very fortunate community of people and resources with a proud history and every indication for a bright future. We have challenges but with diligence and persistence in pursuit of excellence we can and will achieve important goals. That has been our objective over the last four years as we have tried to build value for all who are North Smithfield.

**No organization ever got to great by doing good enough!**

**Gary S. Ezovski, PE**

**North Smithfield Town Administrator**

**December 2016 to December 2020**