



Office of the Town Manager
Phone: (413) 259-3002
townmanager@amherstma.gov

**State of the Town Address
Paul Bockelman, Town Manager**

Amherst Regional Middle School Auditorium
December 12, 2019

Thank you, Lynn.

One year ago, thirteen of your neighbors and fellow residents took the oath of office to bring to life the first Town Council for the Town of Amherst.

While the Town Charter provided some broad outlines, the specifics of governing, for forging this new government, were left to these elected officials. One Town Councilor referred to it as “building an airplane while trying to fly it”. And it was. But we haven’t crashed...yet.

Developing the fundamental rules of governing were the obvious first priority – But the wheels of government didn’t stop. There was the business of the town to attend to:... analyzing the budget, authorizing borrowing, making land transactions, approving appointments to Town boards, just to name a few.

Looking back, it is truly remarkable how much progress the Town Council has made in one year. This success, in large part, is due to the incredible energy and leadership provided by Town Council president Lynn Griesemer. Lynn has been a thoughtful listener and provided the leadership a body like this needs. Thank you, Lynn.

On to the line I am supposed to deliver. I am pleased to report that the State of the Town is strong.

This is reflected most clearly in our finances. Our FY19 fiscal year ended in the positive column with the Town taking in more funds than we projected and spending less than budgeted. This helped to build our reserves, which is important as we look at significant challenges ahead. For FY20, I delivered a budget on time and balanced and it was approved unanimously by the Town Council.

Our finances are solid as we have made the hard choices to manage the taxpayers’ funds wisely. This is evidenced by how we addressed the significant health insurance deficit from last year...not without pain to employees and employers...but we are in a better place today to manage our health insurance risks going forward.

As I showed in the video for the Capital Projects Listening Sessions recently, we have strong reserves, declining debt, and the ability to address the major capital and operating challenges we face.

The strength of our Town isn't just financial, however.

It's about the people. The people, many in this room, who dedicate their free time to serving on boards and committees. The collective wisdom of the over 250 people who serve on nearly 50 committees. In the past year, I have interviewed scores of applicants and made nearly 100 appointments. All of whom were considered and approved by the Town Council.

It is also about the people who work for the Town. Our strength is in our employees who provide professional service to the community every day. We saw an example of that earlier this evening with the swearing-in of the new and newly promoted police officers and firefighters. These men and women are the visible manifestation of our public servants. They are the ones who wear uniforms to work and get lots of recognition. Tonight, however, I also want to recognize the "third arm" of public safety – the DPW workers who were out there during that last storm clearing snow overnight (and out there today fixing a broken water main on Pelham Road). I want to recognize the staff at the Library, Schools, Town Hall and numerous other departments. You all come to work every day to serve the people of Amherst. I am grateful to every one of you for your dedication and professionalism and I am proud to serve alongside you.

And the Town is fortunate to have department heads who are among the best in the State. Many serve in leadership roles in state-wide organizations or speak at state and national conferences. I encourage and expect our departmental leaders to also be leaders in the State.

We strive to provide a government that you can be proud of. Speaking to a high-up official in a nearby community to which we are sometimes compared, this person told me they joke that they ought to have t-shirts that say WWAD...What Would Amherst Do? That is the bar we set for ourselves – to be the community others look to when they want to know how to do things the right way.

When I took this job a little more than three years ago, I was drawn by Amherst's reputation for its commitment to open, high quality government. I knew that our department heads were among the best in the State. I soon learned, however, that that level of skill and knowledge permeated the organization, with those who are second in command and that our front-line employees were equally stellar. They stay in Amherst because they love their work, because people respect their judgment, and because they are challenged by the opportunities they take on here.

I am pleased to report that I was able to recruit three excellent department heads to fill the diverse needs of the Town. You already met Shavena Martin, our new Town Clerk. We also have a new Director of Senior Services – Mary Beth Ogulewicz – and new Director of Human Resources – Evelyn Rivera-Riffenburg. These three women continue the tradition of highly qualified and creative professional department heads for the Town. We are fortunate to have them.

One of the innovations of the Town Charter was the establishment of a Community Participation Officer or, in our case, Community Participation Team. Instead of creating a new position for this role, I asked three members of our existing staff to work as a team to help us better engage with the public. The results – in less than one year – have been astounding. We are out in the community making connections, we are on social media where many people obtain their information, and we are supporting Town Councilors in their efforts to reach the public. I am so proud of Jennifer Moyston, Angela Mills, and Brianna Sunryd for their willingness to dive in to this exciting new venture.

Our entire team is doing amazing things.

It may not be the first thing that comes to your mind, but our DPW is doing ground-breaking work in the sciences. I know, you don't think of the DPW that way, but, in conjunction with the University, they are figuring out new ways to utilize wastewater that's been processed to cool the large buildings at the University and irrigate the University's grounds. Not only will this save millions of gallons of precious fresh water that would have otherwise been used for this purpose, but it will help keep water within our watershed and not be released into the Connecticut River.

We are thrilled to be the home of two new "living buildings" at Hampshire College and the Hitchcock Center and also the Design Building at the University which is the most technologically advanced mass timber building in the United States. Our Fire Department, Health, Building and DPW were all there from the beginning to work with the design and construction teams for these innovative buildings. They were educating themselves to make sure they understood exactly what is in these buildings and the best way to respond to a fire or emergency in each.

Our Police Department has received national recognition for its creative solutions of engaging with students and utilizing landscaping in addressing large gatherings of students, called Community Policing Through Environmental Design. This approach matches nicely with the sector-based policing philosophy the Department employs. It's an ongoing effort, but again, we have great people out there working this.

Our Conservation and Development staff secured Federal funding to help rebuild Groff Park AND were strategic in seeking CDBG funding to build a new multi-use walkway from the large concentration of rental housing on East Hadley Road to Groff Park. We are also working on grants and initiatives to address municipal vulnerability in the face of climate change and to increase access to healthy and affordable sources of fresh food and vegetables.

And, the Town's commitment to affordable housing is paying off in North Amherst where 26 units of affordable housing became available in the new North Square apartments and the Town has issued an RFP to reuse the old East Street School for even more affordable housing.

The Town Council spoke volumes when, in one of its first substantive actions, it created the Energy and Climate Action Committee. This was a clear indicator that sustainability – reducing our carbon footprint – had to be a very high priority for the Town. While the Town has consistently been at the forefront of these efforts, we will be weaving a culture of sustainability into all of our decisions.

Going forward, you will see a sustained commitment to improving our roads and sidewalks. This multi-year effort is clearly a priority for the Town.

You will also see renewed attention to the downtown area – the historic and commercial center of our community. We will bring proposals to the Town Council that will leverage private investments and state grants to make significant change to the downtown area, such as a new playground in Kendrick Park.

Our finances are strong. We have the right team in place. And we are going to need both to tackle the challenges ahead of us.

First and foremost is the challenge of funding capital investments in the four major facilities: Jones Library, elementary schools, public works facility, and fire/EMS station. The Town Council initiated this discussion with four Listening Sessions during the past week. You can go online at amherstma.gov/capital to see all of the information we've assembled – including a 22 minute video that summarizes the needs of these buildings and the finances of the Town.

As Lynn mentioned, we received very positive news yesterday from the Massachusetts School Building Authority that has admitted the Town into the first step of their building program that, if we are successful, will provide a substantial contribution to the cost of a new building. This is a long process...5-7 years...and will include extensive community involvement but every journey starts with a first step and yesterday's vote by the MSBA was that first step!

To tackle these challenges, we will continue to seek alternative sources of funds from a number of new sources like marijuana fees and short-term rental (that's Air BNB) taxes, from new economic development in designated areas of Town like recent developments on University Drive and the East Amherst Village Center, and – importantly – from our non-profit institutional partners who contribute so much to the fabric of our Town and who, at the same time, benefit from our high quality schools, enhanced public safety, and public infrastructure investments. We are all in this together!

Amherst has a bewildering number of faces.

We are the quintessential college town with a bookstore, stationary shop, and inn flanking the historic Town Common. At the same time, within our bounds, is a thriving city unto itself at the University with high-rise buildings, biological research facilities, and an economic engine that employs thousands of people daily. We are an agricultural community with thousands of acres preserved permanently for this purpose and acres of conservation land that provides easy access to open space in every neighborhood. And we are the commercial center for many from around the region seeking culture and entertainment.

Let me end with this. Perhaps two of my favorite days of the year illustrate this best.

First, is the day when worlds collide. Right next door to the weekly farmers market with its artisan cheeses and organic fruits and vegetables... is the Town Fair with its fried dough and whirl-a-way rides and excited school kids of nearly every color racing around, and directly adjacent to that is the

Amherst College reunion with aging men in white slacks and blue blazers discussing weighty issues of the day. These three worlds...all part of our community...are a glory to witness together.

The second day is the Fourth and Fifth of July. On July 4th we have the games and food trucks and the community band culminating in the patriotic fireworks—a sweet celebration just like in many other towns in America. The very next day we have the powerful reading of Frederick Douglas’s “What to the Slave is the Fourth of July” which packs as much power, tension, and relevance as it did when it was written. This is not an exercise in political correctness; it is honoring the complexity of history, including its gross injustices. Our democracy, our country and community, truly is a work in progress and it requires sustained engagement. Yes, we can celebrate our independence, but it is far from a perfect union. We have work to do.

What is the state of the Town? It is strong, it is sound, and we continue to aim for a more perfect union.