



**State of the Town Address  
2021  
Paul Bockelman, Town Manager**

Town Council Meeting via Zoom  
December 6, 2021

The State of the Town address is a time to take stock, to look back at all that we have accomplished – and to reflect on our service. It’s also a time to look ahead to the challenges and opportunities that lie in the future. (And Lynn has asked that I do this in 7 minutes! No problem!)

So, I’m going to say this right up front.

The State of the Town is Strong!

We certainly have work to do – boy, is there ever a lot going on...but I want to begin with why we all should feel good about this work and what lies ahead.

First, it’s the people. We have experienced, knowledgeable department heads who have developed and forged their leadership skills over the years, never moreso than during the pandemic. These are people who have dedicated their professional careers to serving the public. And I’m grateful to be able to serve alongside them. I don’t get to thank them and their staffs very often, so I want to take this moment to thank every Town employee

for your continued service to the Town and our community. Our organization is what it is because of you.

And what about our finances? I can't say this enough...Our finances are strong because we have superb systems in place and we are excellent at managing our budgets. This is largely due to our finance team who are diligent about ensuring our books are balanced and laws are followed. But, ultimately, our elected leaders have consistently made wise financial decisions over the years.

You don't have to take my word for it. In May, the financial ratings team from Standard and Poors met with us and examined our operations. Their conclusion is shown on this slide.

It has taken years to build reserves so that we are in a position to maintain our superb bond rating and take on the major capital projects that are before us.

Our entire operation – our plans for new buildings and new staff - is predicated on a strong financial foundation – budget management, strategic building of reserves, credible financial policies. While our finances are strong, we must be vigilant to maintain this footing.

We have challenges, that's for sure, and here are some of them. But I believe they are manageable.

And, before I get into our accomplishments, I want to recognize the leadership and commitment of our elected officials. We are fortunate to have elected officials, specifically on the Town Council, School Committee, and Library Trustees who take on

these roles – not for the accolades, but out of a commitment to public service and the hope of making the Town a better place. Believe me, there is very little glory in this work...it's hard, you get criticized, you can even lose friends...all in the service of making the best decision you can for our community. Whether you serve on the Town Council, or the Planning Board, or the Community Safety Working Group...the work is hard...emotionally draining...so I thank each of you for agreeing to enter the public arena.

Managing a complex, nearly \$100 million organization does not come without its challenges. In a tumultuous employment market, we have managed the inevitable turnover and staff changes at every level of our organization. But our systems have held and we continue to provide a high level service to the public.

It is important to note that every Town department stepped up during this crisis. Every Single One. Town employees have been on duty every day to ensure that we have clean water to drink, that our wastewater is removed properly, and that there is always a response from fire, police, or EMS when you call dispatch at 911.

We have opened new playgrounds at Kendrick Park and Groff Park. And work is underway at the new Dog Park and at installing solar panels on the landfill. We continued to move forward with the purchase of the Hickory Ridge Golf Course. And plans have been finalized for an addition to the North Amherst Library funded entirely by an anonymous donor.

For its part, the Town Council established broad goals for the Town Manager which, of course, filters down to the entire team. I will not go into detail on these because

Lynn has already touched on many of the points I would have made. Suffice it to say that we have organized our work to meet the Council's goals. A detailed report on how we met these goals are included in my performance self-evaluation that I provided to the Town Council.

The Energy and Climate Action Committee put together a set of challenging yet realistic goals with milestones that will help the Town take concrete steps to reduce our carbon footprint. Here are some of the actions we have already implemented.

Our main mission over the past 20 months has been to keep the community healthy, safe, and secure during a massive pandemic. Our team has done that.

In responding to the pandemic, the sheer number of initiatives undertaken by the Town is impressive. Everything from emergency rental assistance for those who could not pay their rent to a range of actions designed to support our local businesses. I want to recognize the energy and tireless creativity of the leaders of the Chamber and the BID.

We have seized on the opportunity – and funding – the pandemic has provided. We have been aggressive about securing outside grants. This is just a few...but we have brought in millions of dollars to make improvements in the Town's infrastructure.

Town staff continue to move forward on affordable housing projects on Northampton Road, Belchertown Road, and the East Street School. And we are working with the Craig's Doors to seize this unique moment in history to obtain a site for a permanent year-round shelter in the Town.

The Community Safety Working Group has given voice to the call for racial justice in Amherst. We have budgeted for and have been working on implementing TWO new departments: the Department of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion and the Community Responders for Equity, Safety, and Service or CRESS program. Envisioning a new way of responding to crises in the community is important. Concurrently, the Town has become a nation-wide leader in moving forward on reparations, breaking ground on what this means in our community and in the nation.

In working with the CSWG, I am often struck by the profoundness of changing how power works, of working to ensure that every community in Amherst has a seat at the table. It is not lost on me that as a white, cis, straight man who must work within the framework of existing state law and the Town charter, I need to question when I am helping and when I am hindering the process. It can be challenging to maintain my own moral compass, but there is nothing more important than this work. I have been impressed by both the police department's and the CSWG's commitment to the process, I thank both, and I'm glad that together, as a town, we are thinking through how best to assure that every community member feels safe and well-served.

Lastly, we are seeing real progress with our four major capital investments. We have a financial plan in place that proves we can take on all four projects if we follow the plan. We have major grants for the new elementary school and the renovations to the Jones Library. And the Town Council has approved funding so that both projects are

advancing in the design stages. We continue to seek a suitable site for the DPW which will free up that site for the Fire Department headquarters.

We are in challenging times...uncharted waters. As a community, we are at our best when--even when we disagree--we maintain our basic civility and curiosity about one another's perspectives and avoid name-calling and otherizing.

I appreciate the opportunity to serve you and the people of Amherst. I am privileged to work with our incredible staff. I love living and working and being a part of this special community. And I appreciate the progressive intelligent governance provided by the Town Council and, most directly, the leadership and guidance provided by Town Council President Lynn Griesemer.

I thank you for the remarkable opportunity to serve.