

Community Development Strategy – FY 2009-2012 (for public comment)

Holliston, like so many communities in this state, is stuck between rising expenses and limited help from the state. In the past 10 years, we took on debt to remodel our Fire Station, Town Hall, and three existing schools, and we built a new one. The debt service costs us \$1,000,000 annually. Our police station is under construction now and taxpayers will start to feel the impact of that project this year. Our debt is \$5.8 million, and we will not see significant relief in payments for another 12 years.

Since 1996, we have done debt exclusion overrides and in 2005, an operational one. A 2008 operational override for the schools did not pass, however. This resulted in cuts in staff and programs, increases in class sizes, and the introduction of bus fees for students who live within two miles of the school. That said, with energy costs and contracted pay hikes, we can almost be sure that the town will face another financial crisis this year.

Town Finances

We have limited choices but will take action where we can. The Finance Committee needs to develop a long-range financing plan since this problem will not evaporate.

The BOS has established an Energy Committee that is expected to investigate and report on alternatives and conservation methods that might reduce our fuel burden. The schools are working with NStar on energy improvements. The company will pay 50% for the entire project. (See the School's Strategic Plan). The Water Dept. is looking at ways to reduce energy costs to operate the wells and heat their facilities.

The Town must continue to explore grant possibilities. Many departments have had success in this, and we must continue to review grant offerings to identify those that might help us. The budget will not have the flexibility to address community needs. We will need to get creative.

The Assessors Office has a GIS (Geographic Information System) system by contract. The Assessors are pursuing software that would enable them to maximize the system for their department and others, e.g. to map the locations of all gas and water lines. Right now, we rely on the memories of long-time employees. This system could save money in the long term because today individual departments are contracting for GIS services. We could bring that in-house.

As a community, we recognize that not all of our residents can afford the burden of living here. We must continue to help where we can.

Several years ago, we created the Elderly and Disabled Tax Committee, which oversees a special fund to offer tax relief. Proceeds come from donations from local residents and businesses. Unfortunately, the funds are low now, and we need to organize another campaign to replenish them. The Treasurer's Office will send notices with tax bills asking for donations. We will do articles in the local media.

The Water Department provides rate relief to elders and hardship cases where needed. We should consider consolidating the processes for all "relief" programs to reduce the burden on the needy. We might also work with the local non-profit Food Pantry and link people back and forth to the services available.

The Senior Center does outreach on fuel assistance programs. The Town does not charge Seniors (over 65) for the trash fee. The Town also offers a tax offset to enable seniors to reduce their taxes \$500 by doing community service.

Helping Seniors isn't always about financial help. Often it is about providing social activities and programs that help their quality of life. Holliston is committed to its senior population.

The Library offers book delivery to people who are homebound. They also routinely visit the nursing home and Mission Springs elder complex. The Library wants to expand its selection of large print books.

The Senior Center has enjoyed great success in the past few years and use of services and programs is up. There are more people at the building daily and the parking lot needs to be expanded. The Center has also taken on the responsibility of coordinating and operating a Regional Transportation Authority bus for seniors and disabled in the area.

Affordable Housing

The Housing Committee's Plan states its goal is to provide adequate and affordable housing for all residents in Holliston along the full range of incomes and needs.

In 2001 the town voted to tax itself 1.5% under the Community Preservation Act. Since that time, we have committed \$1.3 million to affordable housing projects.

The national housing crisis has stalled our project to rehabilitate the former Andrews School into 16 units of first-time home-buyer housing, at least half of which would be affordable. We are working with the Department of Housing and Community Development to bring that project to fruition.

The DHCD has funded our low income rental project, Cutler Heights, which we have worked on for more than 10 years. This will produce 30 units in a new building to be erected on the hill behind Town Hall. The town went through a challenging process to get this parcel of land through a land exchange between the town and the Housing Authority. The HA owned a parcel on Marshall Street that was miles from the center of town and inappropriate for the low-mod income population we are trying to serve. We expect to begin construction in 2009.

As part of that project, the design includes a computer training room for students and adults to develop skills, and a community area for residents and visitors. The Town needs to explore options for getting computers and people to provide the training. These programs could be accessed by others in town as well.

Cutler will also need social services support for residents. Our office of Youth and Family Services is poised to help and they have the contacts to provide services in domestic abuse, addictions, job placement, resume development, GED etc.

The Cutler Heights project produces an access problem for the Water Dept. The new building will block access to the standpipe on Mt. Hollis. The WD will have to build a short road to the standpipe out of the parking lot.

Another affordable housing goal is to develop a parcel off Pinecrest Road for home ownership. The Housing Committee hopes that this project will "have legs" within four years. Again we will explore what kinds of buyer assistance programs might be needed.

Because house prices are down right now, the Housing Committee will explore opportunities to buy in-fill houses/land and sell them with affordability clauses.

A number of homes in Holliston's low and moderate-income community are in need of critical repairs in order to keep them livable. We'd like to explore a program to address these issues with low interest loans

and outright grants so eligible homeowners could address building code issues, energy-related improvements, as well as such critical items as new roofs.

A growing need in Holliston is for homes to be retrofitted for handicapped accessibility for seniors interested in remaining in their homes. The changes must be made in order for them to live there for the long-term.

The Housing Development Corporation hopes to have funds to buy desirable properties that might be going for short money that could be deeded as affordable. They also want to offer First-time Home Buyer Assistance and counseling services, which would be beneficial to buyers at Andrews and to people interested in purchasing single family houses and condominiums while prices are dropping and foreclosures are available. These programs would be targeted to low and moderate income people.

They will continue to work with the Housing Committee to address areas where zoning affects the affordability of housing. This includes things like Accessory Apartments.

Open Space and Recreation

“There will be a network of trails that provides opportunities for biking, walking and skiing and links neighborhoods to shopping, schools, and recreation facilities.” (Open Space Plan)

Open Space and Recreation

We need to improve the parking at the new NStar area and develop handicapped accessibility.

The ConCom would like to institute a uniform management plan for all its Conservation lands.

The ConCom wants to expand education to the community about existing conservation land, the benefits of it, how to put land into conservation and conservation practices.

The Commission wants to connect trails to sidewalks, particularly in East Holliston through the Center of town where land that has been preserved connects to downtown and the East Holliston shopping areas. The Commission would like to encourage neighborhoods to help create the trail system.

To maximize the potential of Lake Winthrop, the ConCom got a grant to evaluate conditions now. We also need to revisit the dioxin issue to see if the contamination persists. We need to deal with that and with the weed overgrowth in the Lake. These have been chronic issues for many years.

The Parks and Rec. Dept. needs to make the bathrooms at both Goodwill Park and Pleasure Point handicapped accessible, build an HA path from the Stoddard and Pleasure Point parking lots to the lake, make the playgrounds at both Pleasure Point and Stoddard HA accessible.

The Rails to Trails Committee continues to work at securing control of the old rail lines from CSX at the east end of town. In the meantime, the trails at the west end of town are taking shape. Soon the trail from South Street will connect directly to Hopping Brook. Heading west, the trail goes into Milford.

The town will continue to make appropriate improvements to the town-owned golf course, recognizing that it produces a revenue stream for the town and a social center for the community at the clubhouse.

Mission Possible

Town government is working with Mission Possible, a local nonprofit, to rehabilitate Goodwill Park and outfit it with equipment that is handicapped accessible. The goal of this collaboration is to reconstruct a recreational space that will allow for seamless integration of individuals who battle a variety of disabilities with their typically developing peers or families. Currently Holliston Public School is able to identify over 500 children with such disabilities that are serviced on Individual Education Plans (IEP). The design of this reconstruction meets current ADA guidelines of 70% accessibility. The town Highway department shows a continued commitment to this access for individuals of all abilities by generously offering to level the old playground site at Goodwill Park, remove old equipment, and grade to prepare for new installation of the new playground. These services have a total market value of (\$40k). Additionally, the town has committed to designing and constructing a handicapped parking spot adjacent to the playground. This will allow for adequate space for a handicapped van to safely unload a wheelchair while not impacting pedestrian safety and traffic access in a densely populated downtown neighborhood.

Public Health and Safety

Board of Health

The mission of the board of health is twofold: to promote and protect the public health and safety, and to protect the environment.

Because all buildings in Holliston have septic systems, the Board of Health spends considerable time in reviewing and dealing with Title 5 issues. We had a reputation for being exceedingly restrictive – beyond the requirements of T.5 – thus driving up costs for builders and homeowners. In the past three years, the BOH has completely reversed that situation and restructured its operation. Today, permits are handled expeditiously and complaints have evaporated.

The next step is to provide homeowners with education on how to care for their septic systems and to provide financial assistance to pump the tanks of people who cannot afford to do so themselves. Dysfunctional systems pose a public health risk.

We have a few houses in a Zone 1 near one town well. The town has taken steps toward solving that problem by identifying an area outside the Zone 1 where a communal septic system can be installed. In the meantime, we need to make sure the existing systems are functional.

The BOH has been aggressive in developing a Medical Reserve Corps as prescribed by the National Homeland Security Act. This Corps is charged with preserving public health in the time of a crisis and will be responsible for setting up shelters and providing support to people who are in need. Part of this will include identifying all handicapped persons in town, block by block, and linking them with neighbors who will help them in the event of a crisis. The Emergency Management Dept. of the town will work with the MRC to provide training on Hazard Preparedness to all special needs populations.

Another priority for the BOH is educating homeowners on pesticide reduction. The lush green lawns that look so pretty can be a health threat. The BOH wants to educate the community on the risks and the options.

Disability Advisory Committee

While our public buildings are handicapped accessible, some of our recreation trails and parks remain challenging. The downtown stores and banks are not accessible, which contributes to isolation of the handicapped. The Committee wants to have a study done of the downtown area (Spring St. to Town Hall, Railroad to Highland) to see what it would take to make it handicapped-friendly. In that study, they want

suggestions for how to help property owners make improvements, like façade programs with deed restrictions.

The Selectmen have identified a problem with the HA access to Town Hall. The ramp sits under the gutters on the north side of the building. In bad weather, ice forms on the ramp making it impossible to use. We may need a roof over it.

Holliston Fire Department

HFD will continue to offer education on fire and fall safety. The department wants to have a smoke and CO detector education and distribution program. The stumbling block is that they need a system where the batteries would be replaced. Seniors cannot always do that and may not have anyone to help them. This might be a joint effort with MRC where once a year a team of people visit seniors and do the batteries.

Highway

In addition to improvements to the downtown, over the past two years, the Town has undertaken a plan to build sidewalks to loop schools with the downtown. The largest project to date was along Prentice Street to the High School. There needs to be a sidewalk extension added to High Street for children walking to middle and elementary schools. Another priority will be connecting the parks on Norfolk Street to the center of town.

The Town needs to ensure that there are adequate sidewalks, with handicap accessibility, between the center of town and the two affordable housing projects (Andrews and Cutler) which are at either end of downtown. This means finishing the sidewalks from Spring Street to downtown and creating sidewalks from the new Cutler Heights to Washington St.

Holliston Police Department

Using a grant, the Police Dept. has provided education and free helmets to young people in town in an effort to get them to use helmets when bicycling and/or rollerblading. They perform patrols and give kids helmets.

The Court Diversion program, operated out of the Youth and Family Services office in conjunction with the Police, continues to effectively give kids a second chance when they run afoul of the law. The kids do community service projects around town, which help the community and hopefully teach the kids a lesson or two.

Elder abuse and domestic violence appear on our Police Log just as they do in other communities. The Department would like to do more education and outreach.

Senior Center

The Senior Center wants to create an emergency shelter there, because seniors who are moved from their homes in an emergency would be more comfortable in the more intimate and familiar setting of the Senior Center than in the large school shelters.

Economic Development

The town needs to revisit its economic development objectives as presented in the 1996 study to update and implement them.

We must explore broadening our tax base. Twenty years ago, commercial and industrial operations accounted for 15.6% of our tax revenues. Today that number is 10% reflecting a rise in residential properties without a comparable increase in business buildings.

As part of our e.d. plan, there were zoning, boundary and regulatory changes suggested. The consultant voiced concerns about the interface between residential and non-residential uses. It will be important for the Town to revisit these. Officials have recently begun investigating establishing an Economic Target Area for Holliston, probably by joining with a neighboring community.

Create a standing Economic Development Committee at Town Meeting 2009.

The Town should establish a standing Economic Development Committee by vote of Annual Town Meeting.

Streamline building processes

A hidden cost in building is the cost of complying with regulations. The Town needs to undertake a review of its permitting and inspecting processes to streamline them as much as possible. Regulatory delays are the kinds of things that offend businesses looking to locate. Because we do not have easy access to any highway, we need to make our community attractive in other ways. If we could develop a reputation for being “business-friendly,” we might do better in recruiting new industry to fill our existing parks. The town will explore adoption of the provisions of MGH c 43D Expedited Permitting for priority development sites.

Downtown Revitalization

The center of this community looks essentially the same way that it did 100 years ago. Most people here value the history and small-town flavor of the downtown. In an effort to “beautify” the center, a local volunteer group encouraged merchants to install large planters. The group also funded several wrought iron benches that have been placed in convenient locations.

To encourage pedestrian access to the center of town, over the past few years, we have used town and state resources to improve our sidewalks and make them handicap accessible. The new sidewalks are concrete with brick edges improving their appearance.

The merchants then pooled their resources to buy trees for in front of their shops. The owner of one major block is investing money to rehab his historic building and eliminate the facades that were added over the years. He is also making the building handicap accessible, something that was a real challenge because there is a step at each doorway. He added to the back of the building to include a ramp.

As part of the downtown improvements, we invested in crosswalks with overhead flashing light system to make it easier and safer to cross Washington Street, Route 126/16. The Police have increased patrols in the center and are ticketing drivers that ignore pedestrians trying to cross. They are fining to the maximum, which is \$200 for a violation.

The Planning Board started to re-vamp the zoning around the downtown area this spring by establishing a Village Residential zoning district. Working with residents of Church Street, a small area was targeted and Town Meeting approved the changes in May. Further study of the existing Village Center Commercial district is anticipated. The potential for mapping changes and added design review standards will be explored, especially in the transitional areas between existing mixed-use structures and more traditional residences.

Agricultural Commission

We are proud to have four active farms in this town, each of which offers fresh fruits, vegetables and flowers. One is a turkey farm as well. The Town created an Agricultural Commission to promote local agriculture, to market local products and to serve as facilitators should conflicts arise between farmers and neighbors or town departments.

In addition, Town Meeting passed a By-law that labels the community as pro-agriculture. The Commission installed signs at each entrance to town stating that we are a farm-friendly community.

HHS has a greenhouse and the Ag Com assists with the educational program there.

The Commission is now investigating renewable energy options, perhaps wood chip burners, to relieve fuel costs for farmers, especially those that operate greenhouses.

Tax Incentives

In the past, we used a TIF to recruit a large, new business to one of our industrial parks. We must explore this and other tax options available to encourage businesses to locate or expand here.

PWED – East Holliston

After more than a decade of machinations, we finally received a PWED grant from the state to redo the intersection at High and Washington. The work that remains includes paving of Washington Street from Locust to Whitney, depressing the hill and installing the rest of the sidewalk to Whitney. The town will get a payment from Covanta for this work in February.

Education

The Holliston Public Schools are committed to providing the resources and opportunities that will enable each student to develop and maximize individual potential in a positive and collaborative environment that encourages and affirms academic achievement and personal excellence. (Schools' Strategic Plan)

School Department

The school department has an extensive planning document (available online) with their strategy and objectives detailed for the next few years. The school management continues to seek ways to partner with other departments and organizations to offer services and opportunities for residents. They now provide an annual newsletter to the community in which they detail current news and provide updates on issues.

The Schools will be working with the MRC on developing shelter plans. They work with the Ag Commission to provide a gardening program for a special needs class. This hands-on experience teaches science to the students while introducing them to a potential lifetime hobby or skill.

Library

The Town recognizes that the students who do not have computers at home need to have access at the Library and has invested in more computers. They also provide computer training.

The Schools have a rapidly growing number of students who require English as a Second Language training. The Library would like to do an outreach program targeted to this population and develop a collection of parenting materials in their native languages. They will work with the schools on this.

Other Departments

Flagg Community Center (or other building plans)

The former Flagg school building housed the Town Hall while that building was renovated. Today it houses the Police Station as the new one is being built. The Parks and Rec. office and programs continue to work from there as do the Youth and Family Service Programs. A committee continues to evaluate future uses, including a community center of some sort.

Planning Board

Projects on tap: updating groundwater protection areas and developing a sidewalk master plan, working to establish zoning performance standards for non-commercial and commercial wind, solar and other alternative energy installations, and redefining performance standards for traditional and non-traditional home occupations and contractors' yards.