

TOWN MANAGER UPDATE

To: Orono Town Council
From: Sophia L. Wilson, Town Manager
Date: February 10, 2023
RE: Items of Interest - Brief Update

Please find the following items that may be of interest. If you have any other items you'd like to discuss, questions, or concerns, please do not hesitate to contact me.

- **Property Tax Update**

Last Thursday marked the due date for second half property tax payments. Although the Town Clerk's Office was short staffed, the team did a remarkable job taking care of these payments along with all of the other routine customer needs. As of today, the following remains outstanding:

Real Estate Property Taxes:

- Originally assessed 2,447 accounts a total of \$13,747,864.32.
- Currently 488 accounts have a total remaining balance of \$1,604,986.09.
- 88.33% collected

Personal Property Taxes:

- Originally assessed 222 accounts a total of \$260,782.82.
- Currently 48 accounts have a total remaining balance of \$31,707.70
- 87.84% collected

Based upon experience, we would expect to see late payments continue over the next few weeks and significant activity later this spring when staff sends reminder postcards and then the official lien claim and demand notice to delinquent accounts.

- **Trees**

As Councilors may be aware, the Town's Public Works Director functions as its Tree Warden with support/guidance from the Tree Board (required by Ordinance and State Law). While staff and the Tree Board previously identified trees in Webster Park that needed attention, the ground conditions did not allow the necessary equipment to go into the park until later this fall. As soon as practicable, staff worked with its consulting tree service and certified arborist (Zuhlke Tree Service) to address these tree health and

safety concerns at a cost of approximately \$5,000. In addition to this maintenance work, the recently completed tree inventory identified approximately 15 trees that were dead or dying and needed to be taken down.

Several trees were damaged in the 12/23 ice storm and required professional attention. Staff estimates costs of approximately \$15,000 related to addressing dangerous situations on Island Avenue, Mainewood Avenue, and Mount View.

With each of the trees, the Tree Warden is charged with working with the Tree Board (unless an emergency safety risk/condition exists), owner of underlying property (public trees are often located in easements or rights-of-way which require discussion and coordination with the property owner before maintenance or removal to occur), and tree service (unless the issue is one that existing staff can safely manage).

- **General Assistance**

From the beginning of the fiscal year (7/1/22) through January 19, 2023, staff reports that the Town has received 15 applications for General Assistance of which 8 were approved assisting 34 individuals at a total cost of \$4,612.85. These expenses are within the approved budget; however, staff is concerned about the application/approval trends as well as the complexity of the application process which is absorbing significantly more staff time. By comparison during the FY2022 budget year, the Town handled a total of six cases and awarded three. This trend is concerning as GA administration is one of the Town Clerk's many duties in a workload that simply does not have room to expand.

Specifically staff reports that:

- General Assistance has increased since State / Federal COVID funding was stopped on 9/30/2022. Almost all the cases seen were eligible for these programs and/or were receiving some sort of public assistance funding but when previously approved state/federal disbursement was expected to pay their bills the funds had been depleted.
- ***As reported to officials and the public by Maine (Maine State Housing Authority):*** As of 5 p.m., Sept. 29, the program, which was started in March of 2021, is no longer accepting new applications or renewed applications for rent or electric utility assistance. The program, launched as a temporary support, is paid for with federal funds authorized under a pair of COVID-19 relief laws. "A lot of people have been placed into apartments with our assistance, and we worry whether they'll be able to afford that rent after our program ends," said Mary Cook, a program director for emergency rental assistance for the Opportunity Alliance.

- Two of Orono's GA cases were pre-approved for the LIHEAP program; however, anticipated funding was not available until February. Six cases were receiving regular rent payments through the Section 8 Housing voucher program / rent relief programs, but funding stopped completely. Upon inquiry, they were told no more payments would be made on their lease despite having six months left of approved funding.
- When staff reached out to both Penquis Cap and Old Town – Orono Housing Authority staff, they were told that these agencies do not have the staffing resources nor the funding to honor awards given to their clients. They had redirected these cases to seek out municipal general assistance to buffer until more federal or state money is released. Any new applicants could expect at least a 12-18 month waiting period and in addition, there are not enough qualified housing units in which to place applicants.
- Staff was required to issue assistance denials as a result of program disqualification or not meeting the minimum program guidelines. Whenever possible, staff worked with other agencies to help or used the Town's heating fund/donations budget. By law, cases must be processed within 24 hours. Staff is required to assist applicants through the application process, determine whether previous requirements have been met (if a repeat applicant), contact the State of Maine and other municipalities (when applicable), and interview applicants to ensure a complete understanding of the case, available resources, and extenuating circumstances. Cases that would normally require 1-2 hours of staff time to process and issue determination notices and then another 30 minutes to report and process through the finance office, have morphed into complex cases often with multiple state agencies that require significantly more staff hours and often exceed the 24 hour statutory limit to render decisions. In each determination given, we verify the outcome with the State of Maine Department of Human Services GA Hotline which is dealing with decreased staffing and is experiencing delays in processing municipal assistance requests.

Given the increased demands on staff time, the Town Clerk is utilizing support from the Finance and Town Manager's Office; however, over the next couple of months, the Town Clerk will be working to train the Fire Department Administrative Assistant in General Assistance. The plan will be to transition some of these duties while maintaining oversight and support from the Town Clerk.

- **Staffing Update (As of 2/10/2023)**

- **WPCF: (1 vacancy = 20% staffing loss)** This department has an operational structure of 4 Wastewater Operators, 1 Superintendent, and a Seasonal Laborer (summer). An Operator left in June, 2022, the position was filled with an unlicensed individual who transferred to Public Works in October, 2022. The position remains vacant with little activity; however, last week staff had a promising interview with an applicant who will be moving forward with a tour of the facility and interview with the full WPCF team. As this position remains vacant, additional stress is placed upon staff attempting to keep up with sludge disposal, challenges maintaining job/operational staffing levels adequate to ensure safety, and significantly increased on-call responsibility.
- The **Public Library** was pleased to welcome Brittney Cline as a Library Substitute. This is a pool position from which hours are filled as needed on weekends and to cover both planned (vacations, medical leaves, training time. etc) and unexpected (sick leave, emergencies, etc.) absences of scheduled staff members.
- Over the last several months, the **Orono Police Department** has struggled with vacancies and staffing while new patrol officers are being trained. The department is currently structured for law enforcement operations as follows: 1 Chief Law Enforcement Official; 1 Captain; 3 Patrol Sergeants; and 8 patrol officers. Within patrol, there are two special assignments (Community Services Officer (aka. School Resource Officer) which is filled and Patrol Detective which has been vacant since 2/2021). In addition, the Department has one unsworn officer who serves as the Director of Community Policing (whose duties are discussed further in this report). Of the 7 employed patrol officers: four are available for regular patrol; one is assigned to primary duty with the RSU and is available for back-up and overtime shifts; one is currently attending the Maine Criminal Justice Academy (MCJA) with graduation scheduled in May; and one is undergoing field training with MCJA training planned to start in August.
 - Since the last formal update, the Town has welcomed Cade Campbell as a Patrol Officer.

Staff has consulted with the Union and interviewed local law enforcement agencies as part of an evaluation of the Patrol Detective position. While a long standing special assignment, it is evident that experienced detectives expect a more permanent position that is ranked within the hierarchy. To this end, management is working on a side agreement with the Union to address these

concerns and provide a more appealing position to attract candidates to consider. As discussed previously with Councilors, the Detective position manages investigations, case documentation, and the OPD's responsibilities within the court process. This position is critical to ensure timely investigations, complete court records for the DA and defense attorneys, and compliance with evidence and recordkeeping best practices.

- The **Public Works Department** welcomed Levi Woitko as a Public Works Laborer in mid-December. This position fills the Shared WPCF/PW Laborer position; however, we are structuring it a bit differently. Specifically, in the past, this position was one in which the employee was stationed full-time at Public Works from October-March and then full-time with WPCF from April - September. Leadership identified a pattern of employees hired into the Shared Position moving into Public Works positions and determined that this staffing need would be best met by hiring folks into Public Works as a home department with staff time billed out to WPCF for seasonal labor tasks and equipment operations. It is expected that the two department heads will ensure 1040 hours (or 50% base full-time hours) are allocated to the WPCF.
- The **Town Clerk's Office** has had one vacant Assistant Clerk position (33% of total departmental staffing) since 1/26/2023. A candidate has accepted the position with a planned start date of 2/21/2023. In the meantime, cross trained staff (Finance Bookkeeper and Police Department Administrative Assistant) will assist with covering the front desk transactions.
- The **Fire Department** is currently in the recruitment and hiring process to fill two vacant shift positions and the three SAFER Grant positions. In addition, the department welcomed Shawn McVay in early-December and Shane Bowden in late-January to fill vacancies resulting from a resignation of an employee on long-term leave and the promotion of David Daniel to the Fire Inspector/Community Safety Support position. The employment period begins on 2/27/23 for three individuals hired under the SAFER Grant. Conditional offers have been made to the three candidates with all expectations that they will move through this process and begin shift on 2/27 as planned.

- **Fire Department Operations**

Speaking of Fire Department staffing, it is important to note that the significant recent staffing changes and increasing the scheduled shift complement from 5 to 6 per shift (necessitating the addition of three people funded through the FEMA Staffing for

Adequate Fire and Emergency Response (SAFER) Grant as previously authorized by the Town Council) creates significant impact to operations as employees with paramedic level licensure retire and/or leave, most all new hires arrive without full training minimum training (paramedic, firefighter I & II, and hazmat certifications). In the last year, we brought on six new people with various licensure levels, one resigned to pursue his military career and the remainder are working through training to obtain required EMS, hazmat, and fire certifications. Fire Department leadership will begin the four week internal fire training for the five newest responders on 2/27 and then plan on sending folks to the Fire Attack school in the fall.

In addition to the staffing changes at the Fire Department, it is important to note that after celebrating the delivery of the new engine and its amazing new graphics (courtesy of Firefighter Dennis Bean), the truck could not be placed in service until staff is fully trained on its equipment, storage, pump operations, and have demonstrated proficiency driving the vehicle. While staff works to get the new truck in service, it is also working to dispose of the old engine which was advertised for bid; however, no bidder met the minimum bid of \$5,000. Staff is currently in discussion with a Maine municipality that runs significantly less calls than Orono and might be interested in trying to repair the structural issues with the truck.

- **Community Safety and Support Services**

With agreements in place with the labor union and adequate response staffing in place, on January 3, 2023, we formally kicked off the Community Safety and Support Services Team. This team, comprised of the Code Enforcement Officer, Life Safety Inspector, and Director of Community Policing, is focused on leading a more consistent, holistic, proactive, and resolution based approach to meeting the needs of our businesses, residents, and visitors. This team interconnects with other departments (most significantly, the Town Manager, Parks & Recreation, Economic Development, and the Public Library) to identify potential areas of conflict, connections, and ways to more effectively deploy Town operational resources. In a short time, this team has tackled complaints related to parking along Mill Street and in the Agamoosa Lot; individually met with Orono businesses to identify areas of concern; coordinated three departmental responses regarding overnight parking on Margin Street; coordinated a Town's participation in a federal safety inspection of University lab off-campus; and has actively participated in campus planning for graduation and Maine "Week" programming.

The Director of Community Policing also had initial discussion with the Parks and Recreation Manager regarding the Community English Course which led to further discussions about public outreach/education regarding accessing Town services,

especially how to reach and what to expect from public safety personnel in Orono. We are finding a synergy between Community Policing, Parks & Recreation, and Economic Development, especially related to marginalized and underserved populations.

This team will be providing monthly activity recaps by the 15th of the following month, so there will be more information shared in upcoming Manager Updates.

- **Maine Department of Labor Safety and Health Award for Public Employers**

The Town has been a long-standing participant in its property and casualty insurer's Workers Compensation Safety Incentive Program which confirms that the Town is adhering to workplace safety best practices and results in significant reduction in its annual premium. In December, staff invited the Maine Department of Labor in to complete a town wide voluntary occupational health and safety inspection through its SafetyWorks! Program. As a result of this inspection, staff received a report detailing compliance concerns; however, this list was relatively minor and significantly shorter than expected. The SafetyWorks! Consultant has recommended that the Town correct these compliance issues and then apply for a Safety Health Award for Public Employers (SHAPE). The Orono Fire Department is currently part of the SHAPE Program and, as such, is exempted from surprise Department of Labor inspections for three years. If, as a result of this new application, the remainder of the Town receives this award, it would place all departments and activities in this abeyance for three-years for surprise inspections; however, the Town would still be subject to compliance inspections if the Department of Labor receives health and safety complaints or if there is a serious injury to a Town employee. In order to maintain SHAPE status, staff will need to continue to ensure ongoing compliance with MDOL rules and apply every three years for renewal. While the operational impact of this award is negligible, receiving it recognizes the Town Council priority on safety and staff's excellence in carrying out safe operations that ensure regulatory compliance. It also places the Town in an excellent position to proactively address compliance issues through voluntary inspections as opposed to through MDOL compliance inspections that carry formal violations and fines.

- **Winter Weather Response**

Through February 9, 2023, the Public Works team has responded to 17 winter weather events totalling 50.70 inches of snow, sleet, and ice. These responses required a total of approximately 1,576 staff hours, 1,165.6 equipment hours, 504 tons of salt, and 226 tons of sand. On average, it is costing the Town \$12,762.82 per event or \$251.73 per inch of accumulation.

Since there are several new Town Councilors who may not have the detailed background about Public Works winter weather response structure and approach, the following may be of interest:

When fully staffed, the Public Works Department has a response crew of twelve professionals composed of operators, laborers, and a foreman. Since the composition, severity, and timing of a storm dictate the response, a staffing and approach plan is developed for each storm using general principles related to occupational and public safety, effective response, and efficient deployment of resources. Several years ago, the Town Council approved additional staffing necessary to implement a departmental policy that limits work time to no more than 16 hours per shift.

The Public Works Department is regularly staffed Monday through Friday from 6AM-4:30PM with staff working a combination of scheduled four ten hour shifts (Mon-Thurs, Tues - Fri, or Wed-Sat (on weekends the landfill is open). The team is split into two response shifts (A & B), each with four equipment operators and a laborer when fully staffed. The shifts are assigned to respond depending upon expected storm timing, duration, and clean-up needs. This may involve a single team response or splitting into two distinct teams that rotate 8-16 hour shifts until the storm clean up is complete. The foreman, mechanic, and one laborer work as needed to ensure adequate response. In particular, the foreman works shifts throughout the storm aimed at providing adequate supervisory support and assistance clearing parking lots, downtown, and areas of concern. The mechanic is on-call for repairs and, at times, fill in response (Orono is fortunate as many mechanics would not have this licensure or experience). While the laborer is often assisting with routine response needs, they are scheduled in a manner that allows them to begin clearing sidewalks as soon as the storm winds down.

Over the years, members of the public have had many questions or concerns regarding the Town winter response priorities. While all winter response duties are important, they must be sequenced for operations in a logical manner:

- Safety of our employees and the general public;
- Clearing and treating the public vehicular travel ways;
- Parking Lots
 - Lots adjacent to and supporting active municipal operations
 - School parking lots (if needed to support school operations)
 - Municipal Parking Lots (& Landfill)

- Sidewalks (often happening simultaneous with school and municipal parking lots (but not usually during active storm conditions))
- Parks (depending upon forecast and conditions, these may wait)

Also, concurrent with other activity, the crew also has to assess and address snowbanks that may create a safety issue or impact necessary infrastructure (ie. storm drains with rain or high temps in the forecast; safety features rendered useless because of snow conditions; etc.). State law requires the Town to make all reasonable efforts to treat public roads during a storm; the Town is liable for its parking lots, walkways, and access points associated with municipal service buildings; municipal parking lots downtown are important for access to businesses and clear between 2-5AM; and sidewalks really need to wait to be treated until the road has been cleared or you fill it right back in when the plow goes by to clear the road. To this end, staff makes every effort to keep the roads and active municipal building parking lots/access points cleared and treated during the storm event. Then, depending upon the day of the week and storm conditions, they would work on parking lots and sidewalks in an effort to supporting Town, school, commute, and local business operations. With regard to sidewalks, again depending upon timing, sidewalks would either start at the Kelley Road end of Main Street or on the Main Street bridge and work through established routes (based upon safety and use) aimed at opening up one side of the most heavily trafficked areas and working outwards into neighborhoods.

The Public Works Director works collaboratively with the RSU's Facilities Director in that he provides condition reports and guidance regarding the Town's resources. Town staff does not make recommendations to the school regarding closures or delays as this is an RSU decision.

In the past, the Town Council left the additional laborer position vacant and then determined that, without this position, the department was not able to meet the community's expected service level related to sidewalk clearing. Also of note, the Town has an agreement with UCU to utilize the same vendor to clear walkways and stairs on Town property adjacent to the UCU. All other public infrastructure in the Mill Street village area is maintained by Facilities (a sub department within Public Works). Shoveling at municipal buildings is the primary responsibility of Facilities as well as the portion of walkway at the Town Office which the Fire Department is charged with maintaining, depending upon call volume during the storm.

- **MDOT/Town Planning Partnership Initiative for Route 2 (Kelley Road to Old Town Line)**

In January, staff met with Maine Department of Transportation Representatives and Sebago Technics to kick-off the Planning Partnership Initiative (PPI) related to infrastructure improvements along the Route 2 corridor from Kelley Road to the Old Town townline. In this meeting, the group reviewed the agreed upon scope of work and expected project deliverables. Rob Yerxa, Public Works Director, will be leading the Town's project team and working closely with both Sebago Technics and MDOT to ensure that they are getting the information needed to support the effort and the project stays on track for completion by January 2024. In this meeting, the group agreed to the following timeline:

- January - April 2023 Data Collection (Traffic, Crash Data, Plans, etc)
- April - May 2023 Assess Current Conditions
- May - September 2023 Assess Future Scenarios
- September - November 2023 Prelim Recommendations & Public Engagement
- November 2023 - January 2024 Draft/Final Report w/Cost Estimates

- **Community Conversations**

After the first Community Conversation, related to Orono's Law Enforcement Services, was canceled due to inclement weather, staff realized that other Conversation events were scheduled during Ramadan (after sunset) and Passover. So, we've canceled the sessions and have gone back to the drawing board to reschedule them. At this point, we're looking to reschedule for early-March, late-April, and early-May. Please note these cancellations as they are all listed on the Council Meeting Schedule, which will be updated as soon as new dates are selected and redistributed to Council.

- **Events & Activities**

Parks and Recreation just wrapped up a Rec Basketball season with approximately 85 participants. Last week, they held a pop-up ice skating event on Wednesday afternoon (after the RSU mini-day release) at the big rink with hot chocolate and cookies that a little over 50 people attended. Last week, the Rec team kicked off a multi-week open gym on Tuesday evenings (some organized around themes, some just open for supervised fun). We continue to see large numbers of participants in our afterschool program. The team continues to work with various community groups (Orono Land Trust, Trails Committee, Adult Education, UMaine Campus Recreation, Orono-Veazie Little League, The Housing Foundation, etc.) to review, develop, and promote activities and amenities for the community. Staff continues to plan summer activities (including opening the municipal pool) with UMaine Campus Recreation; work on promoting

buildings and space for public and private community use; will be meeting with seniors to discuss senior programming; make revisions to the website to provide more complete basic information to the public about what Parks & Rec does, how to work with staff to develop programming, and where to find up to date program/event information. Ice making has been difficult this year and with the forecasted high temperatures next week, we expect this to continue to be a challenge. A big thank you goes out to Richard Cherkis, volunteer extraordinaire who works long hours carefully putting down water to give us the best chance at having skateable ice. While Facilities and Parks & Rec staff are also dedicating time in the cold towards this cause, Richard is a driving force behind this effort who is incredibly appreciated by staff (and, I'm sure those who are enjoying some skate time this winter).

The **Public Library** continues to hold monthly book clubs and has created space in its community room to welcome art that staff has seen in the community and invited to show. Thus far, Tom Erikson showed a collection of photos his brother took of famous musicians and Pete Yezukevich showed his colorful and incredibly creative art. Earlier this month, the Library hosted a Youth outreach program from the Maine Audubon Society about how animals survive in winter and a multi-week 4-H Science Club Fridays for middle schoolers. For those in grades 8-12, there is a Banned Book Club. The No Pre Req series continued with community-led discussion in January featuring Robert Klose.

Community English - The Orono Parks and Recreation Department and The University of Maine are working together to provide non-native English speakers an opportunity to improve their communication skills. This is a free class that meets on Mondays at the Orono Public Library and Wednesdays at the Totman Lounge at the Memorial Union on campus. Both locations meet at 10:00am- 11:30am.

[\(https://umaine.edu/iei/community-english/\)](https://umaine.edu/iei/community-english/)

This is just a snapshot of items that I thought may be of particular interest to the Town Council and is not intended to be a comprehensive list of staff activities. If you have questions, concerns, or would like information on these or other items not discussed in this report, please do not hesitate to contact me.