

Board of Selectmen 2008 Annual Report

To the Citizens of Ashburnham:

This last year the Town of Ashburnham has experienced its share of highs and lows as many changes have occurred; not only to our Town's government but in our economy, State and Nation as well.

Our Selectboard has experienced a personnel change with the exit of Mark Carlisle, we thank him for his good service to the town. The entrance of Margaret Whitney, a former selectman, brings new energy to the post. The board voted Christopher Gagnon as Chair and Margaret Whitney as Clerk.

Our Town Administrator's office has seen the departure of Paul Boushell as interim and the return of Kevin Paicos as incumbent in July, 2008, after his year of service to our Country in Afghanistan. Kevin worked diligently to mitigate the damaged budget since his return and now we will see him depart for Hingham in early 2009. We thank him for his service and wish him luck in his new endeavor. We look forward to the familiar Norman Thidemann, again to be our Interim Town Administrator, who is scheduled to arrive the first week of March. A search committee is being formed to implement the selection of a new town administrator.

Our Town Accountant, James Shanahan, left the services of the town to pursue his retirement and we welcomed his replacement in Nancy Haines, a well qualified municipal accountant from Ashby.

Our land office has sadly endured the loss of a great town planner in Eric Smith, who has found employment in neighboring southern New Hampshire. Luckily he is close enough to provide consulting services for planning projects and is able to maintain his close relationship with the Planning Board. Our land use administrator Dénee Howard also sought other employment during the uncertain time of budget cut deliberations. We thank her for her service and wish her well.

Our Fairbanks Memorial Town Hall has seen the completion of a 2.7-million dollar renovation which has restored the building to its former glory, and restored the employees to their permanent offices. The ceremony was held on October 20, 2008. Thanks go out to the Ashburnham Westminster Regional School District for being a gracious landlord during our temporary town hall accommodation at Oakmont. Our appreciation must also be felt for Assistant to the Town Administrator, Sylvia Turcotte who has provided a conduit between town hall locations as well as town administrators.

We celebrated the completion of the 7.4-million dollar Public Safety Complex housing Police, Fire and Dispatch with a well attended open house on October 25th, where we thanked the taxpayers and Cushing Academy for their generosity.

The voters of Ashburnham stepped up to the plate on October 14, 2008 and voted to raise and appropriate funds enabling the town and school district to enter an agreement with the new Massachusetts School Building Authority in a feasibility study regarding the potential rebuilding of the John R. Briggs Elementary School, a building in serious need of expansion. We can only have high hopes for the completion of this project.

We suffered tremendous damage and discomfort during the December 11, 2008 ice storm of the century. Fortunately our town has talented, dedicated people who provided equally tremendous effort in damage control and recovery. Our residents came out of their homes to clear roadways, our outstanding Light Department, led by Stan Herriott, were our heroes in restoring power quickly, our high school principal David Uminski and his wife Carolyn worked 24-hour shifts to provide shelter, and our new Public Safety Complex proved essential to the Police, Fire and Dispatch departments who worked many overtime hours to provide an outstanding level of public safety. The ice storm, followed by an almost immediate twin 10-inch set of snow storms, provided a great challenge to our DPW but the challenge was met by our competent crew. Many thanks go out to all the residents and employees of Ashburnham who allowed our community to stand out, above the rest in our region, in survival and recovery from these natural disasters.

As the Financial Management Review from the Massachusetts Department of Revenue states, "The FY2008 budget process was well defined and ran smoothly; it began with revenue and expenditure forecasts in the fall and culminated with the advisory board's presentation of a balanced budget proposal to town meeting in May. However, several errors were made while the town was being managed by an interim town administrator during the current incumbent's one-year National Guard deployment to Afghanistan. The town committed a serious transgression of municipal finance laws by appropriating \$182,866 from free cash at a November 2007 special town meeting before it was certified. In addition, the FY2009 budget process was marred by several errors and omissions. The most serious was an omitted payment of \$433,000 for the towns' share of the regional school's debt service and that was discovered on the eve of the town meeting. Efforts to balance the FY2009 budget were not culminated until December 2008 with the passage of a Proposition 2 ½ override for \$250,000, and a special town meeting to approve a new balanced budget."

Like every city and town in the State and Nation, we have our financial troubles in this economic downturn. Thanks go out to the voters for supporting a \$250,000 operating budget override on December 1, 2008 which allowed us to keep the majority of employees providing services to our town. Unfortunately, the State has had to renege on \$84,847 in funding for this year and we are unable to replace several positions left vacant by departures. FY2010 will see continued reductions in local aid from the State so that budget must propose some personnel cuts as well.

Although we continue to experience troubling financial times, our Town continues to move forward. We have a vibrant community made possible by the activities of its inhabitants and we should all be thankful for what we do have.

Respectfully Submitted,
Christopher Gagnon, Chair
Margaret Whitney, Clerk
Jonathan Dennehy, Member