

TOWN OF BUCKLAND  
MASSACHUSETTS



Hello! If it seems like we just finished a protracted budget season, you're right. In a year marked by the COVID pandemic that delayed budget setting across the Commonwealth – to include the state budget just finalized in the last week of December – it can feel like déjà vu all over again.

But, here we are, ready to start the next fiscal year budget cycle while still facing an uncertain revenue outlook that is highly dependent upon a prompt and effective rollout of the COVID-19 vaccine. One more thing that we have zero control of and yet, all of the risk.

Before we get to all that I want to take a minute and reflect on some of the positives we saw in 2020.

We started the year off with a big move for the Highway Department. Steve was able to move his crew into a brand new, state of the art, highway garage. Leaving the drafty and some-what broken Mayhew building must have been so hard to do. Not!

Hard to believe that Open House was the last public gathering we had in Town before our worlds shut down with the arrival of Covid-19.

We knew we had a great Board of Health and Emergency Management Director but we didn't fully understand their awesomeness until we asked them to manage a pandemic. I can't say enough about how lucky we were to have Marti and Herb out in front keeping us informed.

Our Buckland police officers were challenged early on with being handed the responsibility of making sure all of our village guests and residents kept their mouths AND noses covered and stayed six feet apart from each other. A job not even the most experienced officer was trained to do. Add to that the stand up of Black Lives Matter protestors who decided our Iron Bridge would set a nice stage for their protest events. Our department did a better than awesome job of keeping the peace as well as their six feet.

Our Librarians became essential workers to residents once used to using the library as their social hub. Thank you Jane and staff for finding a way to not just keep books safely in circulation but for meeting the less tangible needs of our residents, connection.

Although it meant saying goodbye to co-workers who were also friends we welcomed many new faces to #teambuckland this year. We hired two excellent new fellows to our highway crew, Anthony and Jake. They have hit the ground running and taken on the road crew responsibilities with enthusiasm and pride. And they haven't even hit a single mailbox yet!

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We also brought into the family Lisa at the Waste Water Treatment Facility. She came on board fully licensed and has been a great partner in pool to Dan. I don't know if DEP gives out extra credit for tidiness at a WWTF but if they did Lisa's efforts would make us at the top of the list.

In the Town Hall we were forced to teach ourselves how to get through the day after Sherry retired. Replacing Sherry seemed risky at best – especially during the shutdown – so it was a blessing when Pam agreed to take on many of the administrative responsibilities – including keeping track of me. She is now working with Mary to expand her repair "tour" of ditches and every indication is that they will make a great team.

Within mere months of being elected Town Clerk, Elizabeth absolutely nailed the 2020 Presidential Primary and General Election. In a pandemic. With mail-in voting. With kids at home remote learning. Buckland had record voter turnout and words can not express how proud we are of what our new Clerk was able to accomplish in the most crazy of circumstances.

Meanwhile, Lisa B navigated the Finance Team and the Select Board through the Town's first ever bond rating experience. Hours of extra work and preparation paid off tremendously when the Town scored a coveted AA rating and borrowed at almost \$3 million dollars at a 1.49% interest rate. And in a time where we knew we would need every dollar Lisa kept to a strict billing schedule and didn't let the Corona interrupt cash flow. On behalf of everyone on the payroll, I say thank you!

We have used the shut down to teach ourselves new tricks. We set ourselves up so we can work from home without missing one single beat. We Zoom and we sign stuff from our phones. We moved our vendor and payroll warrant system to a secure but transparent Google format where we, I believe, have created an incredibly safe and efficient system of paying the bills. We used our CARES funds to make improvements to our buildings and provide our team with PPE. We started a newsletter that will keep us connected to each other and our community even though our Town Hall doors remain closed for everyone's safety.

Lastly we sourced over \$1.85 million dollars in state and federal grant dollars to complete major infrastructure projects on Charlemont Road, Nilman Road, Apple Valley Road and Ashfield Street. We procured grant funds to supplement our Elections (yay, Elizabeth), to purchase EMD equipment (good work, Chief Guyette), to equip our police officers with much needed safety gear (nicely done, Chief Hicks), and – maybe most importantly – to support our down town business owners. The picnic tables were a nice touch but those who were eligible for and received micro grants to keep employees on the payroll and their doors open for business I am sure appreciated the efforts of all those involved.

And there you go. Twelve months. Gone in a flash.

So, what does 2021 have in store for our Town? Really. I am asking you. What do you think? Luckily the state was able to keep its commitment to local aid last year but we won't know if the picture will stay as rosy for next year.

The ambiguous revenue environment was at the forefront of the state’s annual “consensus revenue hearing” held on December 15 where the Secretary of Administration and Finance met with the joint chairs of the Ways & Means Committee to hear economic projections for the ensuing fiscal year from a variety of economists and think-tanks.

In short, according to an article in Commonwealth magazine, the hearing yielded revenue projections from minus one percent up to and 8.8 percent gain. The article notes that the “gain” is actually over the reduced revenues of FY21 as compared to FY20, and, comes in the face of anticipated unemployment running from five to nine percent until recovery.

*“Department of Revenue Commissioner Geoffrey Snyder estimated that tax revenue for Fiscal 2022 will be between \$27.828 billion and \$30.610 billion, or anywhere from a 1 percent decline to an 8.8 percent gain compared to the current fiscal year.” - Shira Shoenberg, Commonwealth (12/15/2020)*

Generally, the Governor will offer insights into the expected state aid for the ensuing fiscal year during the Mass. Municipal Association’s annual conference. This year, Governor Baker is scheduled to address the virtual business meeting on January 22, though it is unclear if he will present a benchmark for state aid.

So how do we put together a budget when we don’t know what we have to spend? We must do what we always do and budget as conservatively as we can in fiscal 2022 meaning that department heads will be asked to present an operating budgets that reflect only contractual increases or other expenses deemed necessity in light of the pandemic. Also if there are areas that – because of the pandemic – you expect to see savings please show that in your recommendations.

Although I am typically optimistic by nature I must be someone doom and gloom and suggest that any wish lists and potentially beneficial new programming will likely need to be deferred until the economy further recovers.

However, you are encouraged and requested to submit a separate narrative and budget request for any needed staffing or program improvements in the event the revenue picture brightens. This is important so that the Board of Selectmen, Finance Committee, and the residents understand what you feel is needed to provide our best services should funds become available.

There are many projects I had planned to pursue this year as there remains millions of dollars of visible and hidden infrastructure that is suffering from deferred maintenance; costing taxpayers more money over time. But like you, I need to assess. What’s absolutely necessary? Keeping the boat afloat has to be our priority right now.

Through these efforts, and the commitment of our department heads to stay within budget while delivering quality service, Buckland has enjoyed a stable general operating budget and positioned itself with enough stabilization to withstand some economic fluctuation. Working as #teambuckland we will have a lot to be proud of in 2021.

You will see a new form for budget requests. It's still the same information I am looking for, just in new packaging.

I have also included FY20's final expense detail report so you can work out your FY20 actuals.

**Please submit all budget requests by email no later than Friday, Jan. 29, 2021.**

I appreciate the many demands placed upon you and your staff and pledge to do my best to advocate for you and your department as the Finance Committee and the Select Board do their job to balance the competing needs of all departments. As always, THANK YOU for your service to the community.

#### **FY22 BUDGET DEVELOPMENT TIMELINE**

- Budget Worksheets sent by Town Administrator week of Jan. 11, 2021
- Informal budget discussions with Fin Com and Select Board Liaisons – Jan 1, 2021 to Jan. 30, 2021
- Operating budgets Due Jan. 29, 2021
- Finance Team meeting via Zoom to review draft budget, week of Feb. 1
- Finance Committee meeting via Zoom to review draft budget, week of Feb. 8 or Feb. 15
- Finance Committee to meet with department heads to discuss budget recommendations, starting March 1
- Town Administrator; Finance Team March 2021 seek consensus with Finance Committee on Projected Revenue, Expense and Budget
- Town Administrator; Finance Committee, April 13, 2021 Formally Present Budget to Select Board
- Present Budget to Annual Town Meeting, TBD