

State of the Town - April 23, 2018 - Dan Dunn, Chairman of the Board of Selectmen

Thank you Mr. Moderator. Good evening everyone. Welcome to our elected and appointed officials, town employees, members of the public, and media. Welcome to all returning Town Meeting Members. And a warm welcome to all first-time members. Thank you for joining us. It's going to be an eye-opening experience, and we're all going to benefit from your fresh perspectives.

Town Meeting is the town's own version of New Year's Day. There's pageantry and celebration, remembrance of people who have passed on, and maybe even some fireworks. It's a time to reflect on the past year and to think about the future - and the time to make a few resolutions to be an even **better** town next year.

I'll start our New Year by celebrating some events of the past year.

I'm proud of the continued excellence of our schools. Two different national publications put Arlington in the top 2% of the nation, with Arlington High School recognized as a leader in STEM education. We're continuing to invest in our schools. The Thompson expansion is done and the rebuilt Stratton is open, completing the promise to voters in 2000 to rebuild all seven elementary schools. The Gibbs rebuild is underway and will be done in August, and the Hardy expansion work starts this month.

I'm also proud of the innovation and improvements in our municipal programs. The new parking management system is working well, and parking is more fluid in the Center. The collected fees will soon to be reinvested in the Center to support the business district and neighborhood.

Separately, we have obtained a new grant to plan a revitalization of the Arlington Heights business district. And we've also used a grant to identify local hazards caused by climate change, and that has put us in the position to apply for implementation grants.

Some of the improvements are more internal. Earlier this month the voters endorsed the re-alignment of the Treasurer's position, and at this meeting we will ask you to take the next step to modernize our financial organization and re-align the Comptroller's role.

These are not all the things we have to celebrate this year, but it's a good list. I wish I had the time to celebrate all of the work done by our town's great employees, but that clock is relentless. Suffice it to say that I am very grateful indeed. If you would join me, please, with a round of applause for the great work they do.

As we start this new year I'd like to **reflect** on several topics.

First, let's consider the pressures of development and real estate costs. We see the impact of this pressure in many aspects of the town, and not just the eye-popping sales prices of homes in our neighborhoods.

These pressures drive development, some of it is desirable, and some of it definitely undesirable. During the preparation for this town meeting a warrant article proposed by 10 registered voters prompted a good discussion about tear downs that spread over several public hearings. There are between 12 and 20 teardowns happening each year in Arlington. Some of those are welcomed by the neighborhood, and some are not. It is not always easy to tell the good from the bad, and harder still to forbid the bad without blocking the good. In the Special Town Meeting next week we will ask you to refer this difficult question to the Residential Study Group for their careful investigation.

Another challenge with development is the unnecessary destruction of trees. In 2016 Town Meeting granted a new set of protections to certain trees during the building process. We have since learned that bylaw isn't strong enough. Certain developers are still choosing to raze every tree on the property before they even start, and they are just paying the current fee as the price of doing business. This year we are asking you to raise the fees to make them closer to the true cost of this practice, protecting many trees from unnecessary destruction.

Housing pressure is also what is driving the inappropriately large proposed development on the Mugar property. The town is aggressively protecting the wetlands and zoning bylaws that Town Meeting has approved. That process seems likely to last for years. Most of that property is flood-mitigating swamp land. We should not endanger our neighborhoods by building in the flood plain - not even for much-needed affordable housing.

My final reflection is on the town finances. 7 years ago we proposed a tax override and made several commitments to the taxpayers, central among them that we would not propose another tax increase for at least 3 years. We have kept those commitments. Through a combination of good choices and good fortune we have been able to make that revenue increase sustain the town for 9 years.

We always knew that it wouldn't last forever, for the simple reason that our costs increase faster than our revenues do. As an example of the expense/revenue imbalance, our school population has grown by 800 students, some 20%, in the last 5 years. We can't provide those students with the same quality education without additional revenue. Sometime next year I expect we will ask the voters to approve another operating override attached to a package of commitments.

As a part of our continuing investment in education we have embarked on a rebuilding of our High School. There have been at least four public forums to help define a vision and narrow down the design options, and there are many more to come. At the end of the process we will ask the voters to finance this project with a debt exclusion tax override.

The leading proposal is to put both the high school debt exclusion and the operating override on the same ballot.

These votes will not be easy, particularly for our neighbors on fixed incomes. Town Meeting has taken steps already to cushion the impact on these residents, including votes last year to approve several exemptions and work-off programs. This year you have opportunity to extend additional relief to seniors in the special town meeting, and we hope to have additional measures for your consideration at the next town meeting.

Now is the time to make our resolutions for the coming year.

We, as leaders of the town, must resolve to put forward the best tax plan that we can. We will make the clearest and most compelling argument to the town's voters that we are able. We will demonstrate that the town has been good stewards of the taxpayer's resources, and ask for their trust in our future choices as well.

I ask that you, the elected members of Town Meeting, make a resolution. You are the deliberative body of this town. Earlier I reflected on several choices the town has made; each of them was decided and guided by votes taken by you. I ask you to resolve to bring your knowledge and your decisions back to your neighbors in the coming months, and to ask them to support the upcoming override votes. We will only be successful in our efforts if we all work together to make the case to the voters.

New Year's is a time for hope, reflection, and action. Over the coming nights, let us make the decisions that lead the town to even better New Year celebrations.

Thank you.

