
Turning The Corner:

A One-Year Report to Hamden Residents From Mayor Craig B. Henrici

As we pass the first anniversary of my inauguration as Hamden's Mayor, I have had the opportunity to look back to review the challenges we have all overcome over the last year as well as identify some of the opportunities that face us over the coming twelve months.

Financial Management

My pledge to voters during the last campaign season was to use fiscally responsible management as the bedrock of Hamden's resurgence. Toward this end we have been remarkably successful, as evidenced by the Positive Outlook issued to the Town by rating agency Standard and Poor's this past July. According to these analysts, Hamden has turned the corner based on the sound management team in place and the commitment to operating within the confines of an honest budget. Make no mistake, this Positive Outlook is good news for Hamden, and the support of the Legislative Council and the Town's residents have made it possible.

However, the agencies did identify two areas of concern with the Town's

finances: the long period of inactivity on its labor contracts and the serious underfunding of the Town's pension. We have ferociously attacked the first problem: settling several contracts that had been expired for a number of years and acting quickly to pass one recently-expired contract. These contracts were hanging over all of our heads, and we bargained in good faith for contracts fair to workers and taxpayers alike. The resulting contracts recognize the cost of health care is a problem growing exponentially in our community and we must work to insulate ourselves from these spiraling costs. Too many have focused on bottom-line wage increases as a measure of contract negotiation success when, in fact, the transformation of the Town's generous health benefit system will have a more significant financial impact on taxpayers.

My administration is working hard to prepare more information for both Council members and the general public regarding the issuance of Pension Obligation Bonds as a solution to our pension issue. The decision to move forward in this process deserves the closest scrutiny, and I am glad that Council members are proceeding forward with the deliberate caution that such a

significant issue deserves. The first step is identifying the problem. The next challenge for all of us is to set in place a solution that makes sense and protects future taxpayers from footing the bill when the pension underfunding crisis catches up to us. I ask all Town residents to dig into this issue and encourage your representatives on the Legislative Council to engage in decisionmaking that protects us not only during the next budget year, but into the future.

Fighting For Residents

The job of the Mayor and the Town Administration is more than just fiscal responsibility. It is our duty to stand beside our residents in their fights, to commit our resources to finishing the projects we begin, to find innovative ways of doing business, and to work together to take advantage of our unique community strengths. At a recent meeting of residents of Franklin Road, one attendee remarked to me that, in all of the years the neighborhood complained of flooding problems, this was the first time the Town had brought the right parties to the table to talk about solutions.

Responsiveness to citizen needs has been, and remains, my number one priority as evidenced by the Help Desk, which centralizes accountability to citizen requests in the Mayor's Office.

I was proud to stand beside residents of northern Hamden in opposition to the proposed gravel pit just as I have stood beside residents of southern Hamden in the Newhall remediation project. Not only has the gravel pit application been

withdrawn, but I have been working with our partners at the Regional Water Authority to put together a plan to purchase the property as open space to prevent any future development of the land. At the same time, the Legislative Council endorsed my proposal to initiate a fund to address homes showing signs of structural damage in the Newhall neighborhood. While there is still a long way to go with that project, I have been truly encouraged by the progress we have made when the Town works with residents instead of at cross purposes. The community has been engaged in reuse planning for the former Hamden Middle School, and I look forward to beginning early next year a neighborhood visioning project that will guide neighborhood redevelopment during and after the environmental remediation.

The Town's relationship with its active veterans has also undergone a profound transformation over the last year. Where conflict once reigned, we now move forward on important projects together. When asked by the Veterans Commission to expand its membership so they could seek members with an expanded base of skills, I worked with the Legislative Council to immediately achieve this goal. The Town recently designated the Veterans Memorial Area within the Town Center Park to preserve the sanctity of the Veterans Memorial. The Veterans Commission has embarked on an effort to bring the Moving Wall—a half-size replica of the Vietnam Memorial—to the Town Center Park, and Town departments including the Arts Commission, Public Works, and Engineering have all lent their assistance to this very valuable project. This commitment to cooperation

will help Hamden heal old wounds and move forward into a new era of collaborative effort.

Finishing Projects

I am also pleased to report progress on a number of projects that had languished for years: the completion of the first phase of construction for the Whitneyville Streetscape; improvements to Borgnine Park; longstanding sidewalk repairs at locations across the town; technology improvements to all of Hamden's elementary schools; and all but the final phase of construction at the Astorino Ice Rink have moved ahead in my first year. We are also expected to close on the purchase of 466 Putnam Avenue in January of 2007, ending years of legal disputes and uncertainty surrounding that property. In addition to these high-profile projects, with the help of the School Building Committee, the Town opened the new Hamden Middle School on time and under budget.

New Ways of Doing Business

Of all of my administration's accomplishments over the last year, I am perhaps proudest of the Town's new commitment to doing business in new ways. Financially, we must begin doing more with less, and the Town's movement to open-source software including Linux and OpenOffice which will save tens of thousands of dollars in software licensing fees, is an example of this drive toward new solutions. The Police Department,

under new Chief Tom Wydra, has established a Street Interdiction Team dedicated to proactive and targeted enforcement of quality of life issues across the Town. The Town cannot and should not continue "business as usual" operations, and it has been my highest priority to give Department heads the flexibility to improve operations.

As part of my commitment to fostering innovative solutions, I have also maintained an open-door policy with Town employees and residents for serious consideration of new ideas. Of course, one of the most difficult circumstances facing my administration, and in fact any elected official, is when there is disagreement with members of the public over policy direction. I faced this issue when presented with a request from some of Hamden's active citizens that we enact a phase-in of property values after last year's revaluation. While my administration ultimately rejected phase-in and remains unapologetic in its pursuit of fiscal policies that our finance and tax professionals attest will benefit the Town, my door remains open for dialogue regarding any and all creative solutions.

Working Together to Take Advantage of Community Assets

Our work with developing partnerships with groups like Quinnipiac University, where we have created a cooperative, rather than confrontational environment, has yielded positive results in which residents finally feel they have a constructive voice in improving the university's development projects. The

new Quinnipiac Hotline also gives residents an immediate channel to the University for daily complaints, comments and suggestions and I am happy that my administration has been able to play the role of intermediary in better integrating the University into the Town's social fabric.

Partnerships have also worked for the Town for short-term projects, notably the use of the former Hamden Middle School for this year's Open Studios event. More than 10,000 people attended this art show, one of the largest of its kind in the country, and it allowed the Town to showcase itself for out-of-town visitors. One of Hamden's strengths is its geographic location and it is critical to our local economy that we market ourselves as a community with many easy-to-find resources.

Another of Hamden's strengths is the long-term residency of so many who call this Town home. And while we can all fondly reflect on the Hamden of our youth, it is also our responsibility to plan for development that suits our needs into the future. Just as the proposed gravel pit was not the right type of development for Hamden, we must proactively court and encourage the type of development that is right for Hamden as this development means lower taxes for residential property owners. My administration has been both creative

and forthright in leading the charge for redevelopment of large long-vacant lots on Putnam Avenue, Skiff Street, and Dixwell Avenue. The redevelopment of these parcels will make a real difference to the Town's economy and I will continue to push for appropriate development of the Town's underperforming parcels.

Critical to each of these successes has been work with, and the support of, the civic associations and neighborhood groups that are so closely intertwined with local government not only here in Hamden, but across New England. We have worked to reduce the distance between residents and the citizens the machinery of government serves, and every victory for Hamden residents reflects their enhanced role in the setting of Town goals and priorities.

In a Town that draws its strength from its diversity—a diversified pool of residents, of businesses, of institutions and of interests—we have the tools available to transform Hamden into the Town we all want it to be. This has been a year of challenges, but I am pleased to report that the hardworking men and women who work for the Town have met those challenges and created opportunities for excellence in government. With your support, Hamden has turned the corner and stands ready to meet head-on the issues awaiting us in 2007.

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