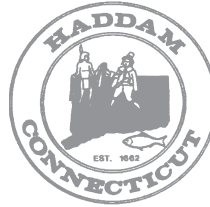


Photo: Barclay Thomas



First Selectman Paul DeStefano:

State OF THE Town



Upon taking office two years ago I implemented a plan to get Haddam back on track. What none of us fully appreciated at the time was the added burden that our nation's depressed economy, impoverished state government and plummeting real estate markets would have on our effort to reinvigorate our community. Yet despite these challenges we continue to make progress and the State of Haddam is better today than it was this time last year.

As we enter 2012, we celebrate our 350th Anniversary as a town. I am struck by the steadfast character, resilience, commitment, and fiber of our residents. To enter a race with a sprained ankle, maintain a steady forward pace, get to a place where the finish line is in sight, then be hobbled by elements beyond our control can be not only a humbling experience, but moreover one that can test our resolve to make our community a better place to live.

Looking Back

We knew what our limitations were when we entered the 2011 calendar year, and we knew what we had to do to overcome them. We knew that we had to replenish basic community services and I am pleased to say that we are

finishing the year with two grocery markets, a pharmacy, several retail expansions, the implementation of a new transfer station, an impending 'dial a ride' transit facility to connect to neighboring towns, a revamped interactive emergency response program, an expanded senior center activity calendar, a student intern program, a newcomer information system, and the availability of an economic development coordinator to help businesses work their way through the regulatory and permit processes.

In addition, we have set the stage for foundational changes that will not only reinforce the work that we have completed, but moreover help prepare us for what lies ahead. Our town government has strengthened its administrative and organizational controls, raised its service levels, extended town office hours, fortified its commissions and commit-

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tees with experienced open-minded participants, and elevated our visibility in the legislative bodies that, like it or not, ultimately affect our future. As a result, we will shortly be ready to take on the daunting task of beginning a long overdue town charter revision process.

As we take stock, then, we must consider that our efforts thus far have been but a small ripple in a stream that leads to a very large river. We must understand that we do not control our destiny on our own and that the external forces that influence the country and plague our state come to rest at our doorstep. We must therefore, now more than ever, act as one. Division of purpose and indifferent personal agendas will not only serve to make our journey to health and prosperity more difficult, but could indeed make it all but impossible. To achieve 'oneness' in purpose, I believe that we must be brave enough to take an honest look at where we are and where we want to collectively go. So, let's try.

Looking Ahead

To start with, our taxes are too high. Now, before you let your mind swing wildly toward the education budget, think about some other root causes a bit as well. We no longer have the Connecticut Yankee nuclear plant operating across the river subsidizing our taxes. We are primarily supported by the residential tax base, which has been negatively impacted by the current economic slowdown.

Next, consider the fact that the town of Haddam is comprised of forty-four square miles of land. Fifty-one percent of that is dedicated to open space. Of the remainder, ninety percent is zoned residential. That means that less than two square miles is available for commercial development and thus, external tax relief.

State of the Town—cont'd

Further consider that our infrastructure is fragile and requires a substantial investment to prepare the portions of commercial development that are usable, which if done all at once would drive the tax rate up even more.

Add to the picture the reality that state grants have been more and more difficult to secure, leaving the burden of required infrastructure improvements to those who can afford to make them prior to developing their property. Unfortunately, without deep pockets, investments such as these are hampered by the economy as a whole and by the reluctance in our lending institutions to open their coffers until the world as we used to know it stabilizes.

I know; on the surface this picture appears pretty glum, but let's try turning it upside down for a moment. What if we were able to continue to tighten the town's belt for a couple of more years while we become more creative in slimming down the education budget? What if we could attack our infrastructure deficiencies with the help of state and federal community development programs that have a direct correlation to private job incentives, thus wooing private investment to join forces with us? What if we created a volunteer force whose main charge was to offset town expenditures through the use of their talents? What if we partner up with neighboring towns to reduce the cost of programs? What if we take a harder look at our deteriorating, sometimes draining asset base and consider what is necessary and what is not? The mountain can seem a lot smaller when it can be chipped at in a disciplined fashion.

For the next twelve months my administration's goals will realistically reflect the economic realities we presently face. Our focus will be on doing more

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Questions to the **First Selectman**

Q: *Households occupied by the elderly require comparatively little in the way of town services, especially education costs. What is the town doing to retain seniors who are thinking of moving or to provide incentives to encourage the elderly to move to Haddam?*

DeStefano: I have tried to kick-start initiatives and improve services that might help seniors deal with the pressures they're now facing. I have just completed a review and will shortly be making recommendations to the board of selectmen to enhance current tax relief programs for seniors. The town has applied for a grant that will increase transportation options for seniors and will team up with the nine-town estuary transit district that services the region. In addition, we are working with the new senior center manager to expand leisure activities and we have revamped our emergency response procedures to assist seniors during extreme weather or natural disasters.

Q: *The Connecticut Yankee (CY) nuclear power facility paid 50% of all local taxes when it was operational. Today that figure is 4% and shrinking. Do you feel that CY is paying its fair share of local taxes? What future plans are there for the 590-acre property?*

DeStefano: Since it was decommissioned in 2002, CY has made Payment in Lieu of Taxes (PILOT) based on a court stipulated agreement. That agreement expired last year. Going forward, CY's tax obligation will be based on its actual assessed value (the bulk of which is tied to the spent nuclear waste site on the property). We have an ongoing dialogue with the ownership of CY regarding the disposition of the property and have gone on record to say that it would be our preference to see a taxable facility (perhaps with a

conservation component) ultimately end up there.

Q: *You recently approved the construction contract to build the new transfer station. How much will the financing costs of the new transfer station raise property taxes?*

DeStefano: Town residents authorized bond financing of up to \$3,205,000 to close and remediate the existing facility and to construct a new transfer station. The construction contract came in about 15% under budget at \$2,135,000. At the end of the day, including other costs (legal, engineering, financing, start-up, fines, etc.) we should be able to bond the project for less than the authorized amount resulting in a lower than anticipated debt service cost of about \$190,000 annually over the next twenty-years.

Q: *The state legislature recently approved the controversial 'Land Swap.' How will Haddam residents benefit from this deal and how much in new tax revenue will the development of this 17-acre site generate?*

DeStefano: At this time no official plans have been filed with our town planner or the P&Z, so I cannot speculate on tax revenue. At some point it will, however, far exceed the PILOT payments we've been receiving from the state that now owns this land. Growing our commercial tax base is vital and every dollar we can bring from sensible development will help offset the burden that has been placed on the residential taxpayer.

Q: *The cost of education is the largest component of local taxes. What steps are being taken to reduce the growth in spending at Regional School District #17? On a separate issue, why does the town of Haddam receive comparatively*

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with the limited fiscal resources at our disposal. Towards that end my top five priorities for the New Year will be to:

- 1) Improve our infrastructure to support town services and pave the way for economic development.
- 2) Strengthen our administrative tools to provide a governing foundation that can carry us into the future.
- 3) Continue to improve our fiscal efficiency to minimize higher taxes.
- 4) Maximize the efficient use of town volunteer groups and services.
- 5) Enhance relationships with key legislators to help gain support for grants and other state/federally funded assistance opportunities.

In the end, the state of our town as we enter the 2012 calendar year will be what we want it to be. We are now and always will be more than our numbers portray. We are now and will always be stronger than we feel. It is almost as though we are being driven by the energy of the mighty river that divides our shores, a lasting, confident, proud symbol of our endurance and future. The day will come when all the expectations we have for our town are met. For now, we are a work in progress, and as long as we seek to press forward in the face of adversity, we shall never fail.

so much less in state education cost sharing grants than other towns?

DeStefano: I will be meeting, along with Killingworth's First Selectman, with Superintendent Thiery to discuss matters of concern relating to lower enrollment, technology costs, special education programs, class sizes, and contingency based budgeting techniques. I have also reviewed the education cost sharing grant procedures with the State Office of Policy Management and asked them to reassess the amount Haddam receives in as much as it seems lower than other towns in the region, particularly Killingworth, based on our student enrollment, per-capita income, and population base.

Q: *The lack of safe drinking water in Tylerville and adequate sewers in Higganum has hampered economic development of these sections of town. How much would it cost to correct these problems and where would the money come from?*

DeStefano: The drinking water problem in Tylerville can easily be addressed, but the \$5,000,000 investment to bring water from Chester, is prohibitively expensive. The State Bond Commission has appropriated \$2,000,000 but those funds can only be accessed if Haddam takes full responsibility for all the contamination in Tylerville—past, present, and future. Since the liability to do so is enormous, this does not appear to be an appropriate alternative. I am trying to get the bonding commission to transfer the allocation to the Department of Economic Community Development (DECD) which will enable us to use that money to participate with the private sector as opportunities arise, or, help us finance a less expensive alternative such as a

community well or industrial clean-up arrangement.

Similarly, the inadequate sewage in Higganum can be addressed with the use of a self-contained 'black box' or 'living machine' alternative costing approximately \$5,000,000, but to do so will require a catalyst to get the ball rolling. We have applied for a \$500,000 STEAP grant to secure the engineering for such a system, and as in Tylerville, will work with the business stakeholders and the DECD to bring a meaningful opportunity to the table.

Q: *Sustainability seems to be a hot topic these days. What is the town of Haddam doing to reduce its carbon footprint and to encourage residents to make their homes more energy efficient?*

DeStefano: These days, the quest for energy efficient households, as exemplary as it is, seems to have taken a back seat to finding a reasonably priced generator. 'Survivability' rather than 'sustainability' seems to be what's on everyone's mind. Sometimes I wish that our town actually had a 'carbon footprint' to reduce, but with ninety-five percent of our land base being either open space or zoned residential our efforts toward energy efficiency seemed to be concentrated on dealing with our aging municipal buildings than on reducing the town's discharge of atmospheric CO₂.

Q: *Many believe that eco-tourism should be a key component in Haddam's future economic development plans. Would you like to see the state convert the unused seven-miles of river waterfront property in Haddam, now leased to the Valley Railroad, into a world-class tourist attraction for hiking, sightseeing and other recreational uses?*

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Questions—cont'd

DeStefano: That unused strip of land hugging the river is probably one of the most important untapped economic assets in Haddam. Think about the opportunity for attracting eco-tourists to Haddam if the town hosted a 7-mile scenic 'Blueway' trail along the beautiful Connecticut River; a landscape the Nature Conservancy calls 'One of the Last Great Places on Earth.' There would be nothing like this attraction anywhere in the state. I am encouraged to see a growing grassroots effort towards this goal and plan on communicating with state and federal officials to help make it a reality.

Q: *For many years Haddam has been town controlled by the Democratic Party. Following the recent election, local Republicans have ousted the Democrats from most leadership positions. Why did this occur?*

DeStefano: In my opinion, there is no real rhyme or reason to what is happening in today's political arena. I am a moderate in principle, and I believe that the division in political parties comes from the extremes on both sides. Extremes can be either self-motivated or provoked; either way, they are not helpful to a small rural town that is trying its best to stay whole while being bombarded by influences outside of its control. I don't see the Republican Party's recent upsurge as a mandate; but rather as a reflection of the public's pent-up desire to see local problems solved once and for all.