

Message From The Mayor: What a Winter It's Been

What a winter it's been. For the first time in my life, I felt compelled to get up on my roof and shovel off the snow a few weeks back. And speaking of shoveling off roofs, I would like to thank Jonathan Flagg, Acting Commissioner of Buildings and Frank Mahar, Director of Maintenance and Food Service, Westfield Public Schools, for their proactive leadership concerning our city owned flat top roofs. I had had asked them to develop an action plan if the snow continued to fall as there were some initial concerns I had of roof overloading in mid January. These two men, well ahead of the first region wide public warnings were issued, led the inspection and snow clearing effort for our buildings. As you heard of slow responses by other cities, this city had already taken care of business. I would also like to thank the school custodians for their extra effort as they cleared the school roofs, which saved the city tens of thousands of dollars.

And speaking of snow clearing, I would like to commend the Department of Public Works management and employees and the contractors for their incredible effort in keeping our streets passable. Early in December, I met with the contractors to lay out my expectations for performance. Last year we had a few neighborhoods that frankly could have been plowed better. I wanted to make sure they understood that I take the public's complaints seriously and that these outstanding issues would need to be corrected. With the exception of one weekend storm early on, the effort has been markedly better even with record snow fall. And the public has let me know that they appreciate the fine effort as our "thank you" type responses outnumbered the bad by at least 20 to 1. Though I know we aren't out of the snow yet, I am hopeful that Spring is soon to be here.

And of course, with Spring, will come not only flowers and green grass, but our old New England nemesis, pot holes. Though like with the winter snow, we've got a plan that I hope will show great improvement in the city's pothole effort from years past. From now until the asphalt plants open in mid April, pothole repair will have to be done with what is called cold patch. This mix of material is temporary and typically lasts a few days, and if you have rain, well then it typically washes out completely. So it will be "proceed with caution" throughout the city until we can get the hot asphalt in town. DPW management has planned an aggressive road repair program that will begin in early April and continue through June with the end result, that we get finished with the majority of the pot hole issues in that time frame.

Now on to some hot pulse line chatter...the bus contract for starters. The present configuration of the contract, limited competition. With the goal of making our vendors, more accountable to the taxpayers, it is in everyone's best interest to ensure that when services by the city are needed, that we have as many bidders as possible eligible for the contract procurement process. From many years of experience a few long standing contract items were eliminated or modified to encourage additional competition. To not foster additional competition, simply leads to a scenario that perhaps, the taxpayers haven't been provided with the best possible service at the most cost effective price. Rest assured that there are performance standards in

the contract that will ensure that no matter who is the next vendor, our children will be transported safely, with qualified drivers.

Another long standing pulse line favorite has been the plight of the trash collection department. This has been an incredibly complex issue as it involves the DPW, the Health Department, the Transfer Station and a private hauler that carts our trash out of town for disposal. The two major issues confronting this department were the cost of replacing the truck fleet, which is estimated to cost over 2 million dollars and the fact that the department was operating inefficiently. The vehicles we purchased were designed to accommodate 1 employee that could make up to 1000 stops a day. Without getting into specifics, this simply was not happening. Performance efficiency was less than half that with additional staffing on the trucks. In this economy, this inefficiency cannot be afforded.

In order to take the politics out of the decision whether to stay in curbside collection or privatize it, I opted to establish a solid waste task force to study the various aspects of our effort. The task force consisted of two members of the city council, (a third member resigned shortly after being selected), three private citizens with impressive business credentials, one of which, a former mayor, and the city purchasing director, former health director and the DPW director. I would like to thank them for their many hours of work spent on this issue.

They were given at first a simple mandate, to determine the city's most cost effective option for trash collection. This rather simple mandate, evolved into a process that included evaluating almost a dozen proposals for curbside collection vendors, our recycling effort, our future of the transfer station, the solid waste fee, and the long haul disposal contract. The findings of the committee, the short version is as follows: the city cost savings associated with curbside collection privatization do not realize enough savings to make privatization a worthwhile effort; the city can realize additional revenue by enhancing our recycling effort; request from the Massachusetts Department of Environmental Protection an expansion of our permit from 50 tons a day to 100 tons a day; establish a commission that oversees hiring of vendors and staff and manages the finances and operations of an enhanced transfer station operation; reduce the solid waste fee to \$40 from the existing \$85.

Being proactive, I can tell you that the following efforts from my office have occurred concurrently with this yearlong effort. The health department and health commission have been working to complete needed erosion mitigation and preventative measure due to storm water runoff. They are actively pursuing the permit expansion recommended by the task force and we hope to begin construction of a gate house this year. Additionally, I have asked both the Health Department Director and the School Food Services Manager to develop a plan to enhance the school recycling effort. Additionally, with the permit expansion we will likely be able to begin the process of enhancing both our residential and business effort. Lastly, the fee. I agree that the fee should be evaluated for a potential reduction. Over the next few weeks I will be "running the numbers" to determine to what extent that the fee can be reduced and still accomplish our objectives.

I couldn't let this message end without providing to you some other updates. I have been told to expect the arrival in mid March of J.H. Lynch and Sons, our Main and Broad Street contractor. Also, after the recent approval of funds by the City Council, both the Casket Company Building and City Cleaners will soon be seeing the wrecking ball. This effort is critical in keeping my promise to you to rid our downtown of blighted buildings. Additionally we will also be demolishing some houses on Cabot Road and a house on Little River Road that we have owned for many years that should have been demolished back then. Work continues on the Great River Bridge and we expect completion by midsummer. As we find out more on that I will share it with you.

I'd also like to put in a plug for my Channel 15 TV show. It airs on Sundays at 4PM, Wednesdays at 8PM and Thursdays at 10AM and 10PM. I will continue my theme of showcasing downtown businesses in the March show. So make sure you tune in and get out and visit our downtown businesses. I would also like to plug a new Channel 15 show that City Advancement Officer, Jeff Daley will kick off in March. His show, air times not known yet, will highlight local commercial and industrial businesses. His show will take you inside to meet the owners and staff and provide you a glimpse into what our businesses do in Westfield. We make some incredible products in town and I'm looking forward to Jeff's show to see what he has in store for us.

I would also like to congratulate all of our winter sports teams across the city for their outstanding efforts in their respective leagues. You all make our city proud. I would also like to congratulate Alex Gartska for reaching the 1000 point milestone in boys' basketball. This is a great accomplishment and considering that he joins only two other boys in the history of WHS it is even more impressive. Westfield has had some good basketball players over the years so it was quite remarkable, I thought, that only three have had that much success. Coach Daley and his boys are doing a great job in making Westfield a basketball powerhouse. Good luck to all the teams as they head into their respective tournaments.

As always if you have any questions call or email me at 413.572.6201 or mayor@cityofwestfield.org.

Respectfully,
Dan Knapik