

State of the Town Address - 2010

At this point in Town Meeting, the outgoing Chairman usually offers a “state of the town” address. I stand before you to continue this tradition. These past few months have been arguably the most actively participated election and pre-Town Meeting period that Sudbury has seen in many years. As has happened before and will happen again in the future, some would say we are at a time when there appears to be a fork in the road, where some folks are feeling the need to reconsider where we are and questioning whether decisions made before need to be reassessed, perhaps a new direction taken. Some might even say that the recent election, voting in a new Selectman, is evidence of that.

But I say that the turning point happened almost 20 years ago. If we look back at Sudbury in the early nineties, we were a Town without a consensus or clear leadership. The majority of our boards and committees were anti-business and anti-development. Commercial zoning was restrictive and not responsive to the needs of the business community. In the period from 1990-2000, the town’s population grew by 20%. School population grew by 50%. Over 1,000 acres of forest and farm land was sold and developed. In that same period over 750 new single family homes were built, bringing extraordinary new demands on our school systems. Our very landscape was changing before our eyes. Our schools were overcrowded and there was not enough recreational space. Individual neighborhoods competed with each other for amenities like walkways. It felt like the firing squad was always pointed inward, toward other members of our community, instead of having a process for setting and achieving goals that would make our community better.

I am proud to say that I was a part of that group who said the process must change. We began our long term master planning. Preservation of community character was paramount to residents as the town grew toward full build out. Residents defined what they wanted Sudbury to look like. They wanted a more livable community with increased recreation, housing for all age groups, and thriving businesses. That process resulted in the adoption of our Master Plan, entitled Sustainable Sudbury. It has guided us since.

As a member of the Planning Board, I helped introduce the current senior housing bylaws and wireless services bylaw, which provide significant revenue to the town with little need for municipal services. We changed restrictive zoning to give local businesses opportunities for growth and retention, including a significant overhaul to the Water Resource Protection District Bylaw essentially allowing existing businesses to grow in place, major changes to the sign bylaw allowing increases in the amount of signage a business could have, and changes to the site plan bylaw providing expedited permitting. We worked to adopt the CPA to preserve community character by purchasing beloved landscapes, preserving historic resources, and giving the Town the resources to fund additional recreational opportunities – walkways, fields, a town dock. We opened the door to lower priced housing units using CPA funds, thereby providing a way for municipal employees, including teachers to live in the community in which they worked. We rebuilt and expanded our schools, received 62% reimbursement from the state in the process, and are now on the downward slope of paying off those debts. In addition, we preserved the Historic portion of the Goodnow Library while adding an expanded state of the art facility to it. Our multi million dollar investment in DPW equipment, previously left outdoors, is now protected in

the Highway barn we built in conjunction with office space to support assorted town departments.

Beyond investing in infrastructure, Sudbury became a leader in the Commonwealth working for senior tax relief, leading to the statewide senior circuit breaker program. Our groundbreaking and popular senior tax deferral program helps many seniors stay in Sudbury and became the model for a statewide program.

With the Finance Committee's leadership, we have moved from near annual overrides, to a financial plan and model that will provide a balance between financial and service level sustainability in most years. To that end, the Selectmen drove the just completed recent collective bargaining with our town and SPS employees to include health care benefit changes in the three critical areas; plan design, greater employee contribution rates, and increased co-payments. These changes will deliver multi-year savings and contribute to sustainability. Moreover, we continue our efforts at sharing resources and expenses with neighboring communities, where appropriate, and pursue regionalization opportunities to assist us in meeting our needs.

Yes, the economic downturn, worst since the Great Depression, has impacted Sudbury – residents, businesses and employees alike, all individually feel the effects but we also feel it collectively with the reduction of state aid to our budget. If we were not seeing this reduction in state aid and key local receipts, we likely would have continued on the path developed by the FinCom of not needing an override this year. Later in this Meeting you will hear the latest revenue projections and revised recommendations relative to next year's budget.

The past 15 years have seen scores of residents on boards and committees working together functionally towards common goals. This is something you rarely find in municipal government. These current board and committee members – volunteers remember – are the most dedicated group of people I know. They are dedicated to making Sudbury the best place to live in the country, dedicated to providing its residents with superior services, dedicated to academic excellence, dedicated to working together to accomplish goals. Many of you, of whom I speak, are here tonight. For me, it has been an honor and privilege working with you all. I thank you for all you do, helping to make Sudbury the wonderful community it is and will continue to be.

This town isn't broken, and doesn't need a complete overhaul as some have suggested. But we are obligated to bear in mind that the issues we face are complex and multi-faceted. We must recognize that there are no simple, sound bite solutions, as alluring as they may sound. For we live in the real world, where what is needed, is for us to continue our past practices of thoughtful discussion, goal setting and making progress towards these goals. The challenge is out there and I know that the many volunteers and leaders in this town will meet these challenges head on and continue to accomplish great things.

A sustainable Sudbury will endure.

Bill Keller

Chairman, Board of Selectmen

April 5, 2010