

GUEST COLUMN: Proposed solutions to Plymouth's challenges

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This is the time of year when people develop new year's resolutions. Some follow through with them, yet most drop them shortly after making them.

Last year many challenges facing Plymouth were identified by many of our fellow Plymoutheans. Well now, let's begin the new year by identifying possible solutions to many of those challenges. Let me begin the new year by offering some of mine:

1. Town governance

Challenge:

Plymouth is governed by a charter that provides representative town government currently with 15 precincts, nine elected Town Meeting members (TMMs) per precinct for a total of 135 TMMS, a five-member elected Select Board, an appointed town manager, an elected town solicitor, and other elected and appointed officials. The legislative body, the TMMS, meet publically, but only twice a year. This is insufficient for a town of more than 60,000 and growing. Some of those TMMs don't even attend those two meetings a year, some are unprepared to discuss the important articles presented, and most simply rubber stamp everything presented by the town manager. This is unsustainable for the future of Plymouth if we want to rise to the level we should, and can. The TMMs also meet monthly or so within their individual precincts and have a chair. Not all of the TMMs show up. Each precinct has a chair of their nine TMMs and those chairs meet monthly or so, yet not all always show up. All of these meetings seem impressive, yet they seem to accomplish little.

Proposed solution:

Support efforts to develop a question and put it on the ballot at a future Town Meeting to form a Charter Commission to revisit the town's charter and determine what may be the best form of government for Plymouth for its future. The Commission members, however, should be elected by the people of Plymouth, not appointed by the town moderator, as is currently the case, who can stack it against any such change if he wants to. In this light, it is interesting to note that the only other community in Massachusetts with a population of roughly the same size as Plymouth, that is still a town, is Brookline. Framingham was the most recent one to change and others like Weymouth and Braintree changed in the past. Plymouth needs to modernize its governance so it can move on and benefit from a more efficient government, like other such communities!



2. Road construction/repair/maintenance

Challenge:

Plymouth has over 400 miles of roads of many types and categories. The director of Plymouth DPW has stated publically many times that somewhere in the vicinity of \$8 million annually is needed to keep these roads up to modern safety standards to protect our drivers and business interests. Plymouth levies an excise tax on all vehicles registered in Plymouth. Traditionally such a tax is used for road, construction, repair and maintenance. Often there is a dedicated fund, such as an enterprise fund, to receive such taxes and from which road work is scheduled and paid for. Not in Plymouth! Here those taxes go into the General Fund and the DPW has to beg for road funds, but is never adequately funded, which is why our roads have been in such deplorable condition. This past year we have seen a lot of road repair and resurfacing. However, that \$5 million increase was likely a one timer to look good for the upcoming Plymouth 400 when Plymouth will be on the national and world stage. How would it have looked to the world if in 2020 during our Plymouth 400 celebration our roads looked like they did in 2018?

Proposed solution:

Create a permanent enterprise or other similar dedicated fund for our roads, fully funded by the excise tax revenue. Yes, if that were done, those funds that currently are taken from the general fund for road work would have to be replaced. Plymouth Director of Finance Lynne Barrett is a capable executive who should be able to figure out how to do this, with the cooperation of the town manager, SB and TMMs, also working with our private economic development colleagues in the several local and regional organizations. As the second highest paid employee in the town, just under that of the town manager, we should expect, and deserve such solutions. She has come up with creative financial solutions to other financial challenges, and there seems to be little reason she can't do the same with this challenge.

3. Attract new businesses/diversify the tax base

Challenge:

Plymouth needs to attract new non-retail commercial businesses. About 80 percent of Plymouth's property tax revenue is derived from homeowners. No wonder property taxes are so high and hurting more and more of our homeowners. About two years ago Plymouth contracted with Northeastern University to research what factors act as incentives and disincentives for businesses to locate in Plymouth. One of the biggest disincentives was the lengthy and cumbersome permit and approval process Plymouth puts prospective businesses through to locate here. At the meeting where N.U. presented their findings, our town manager said that her office would take this on and look to consolidating and streamlining that process. What is the status of that? It shouldn't take several years to do it. If it has been completed, why isn't it routinely advertised and promoted? If not, why not? In the short five years since I have located here I have heard numerous stories of businesses wanting to locate here but gave up due to this process. As an example, it took the developers of the Pinehills in South Plymouth more than 220 meetings, over two years, to get all of the approvals needed to begin that project. Fortunately for the town, they were persistent.



Proposed solution:

The town manager should simply do what she said her office would do, and then promote it through, and with, our business community.

4. Department of Public Health

Challenge:

The few employees of the department work hard with meager resources to provide the very limited public health services they are able to. Plymouth needs a full service Department of Public Health, with the resources necessary to provide such services, all scaled to the size of our community. Dr. Nate had the vision to bring this about but his vision was apparently such a threat to town hall officials that they drove him out of town.

Proposed solution:

Expand the services offered by the department and provide it with the resources necessary to deliver these services. Work closely with the Plymouth Board of Public Health to bring this about. This is another challenge for the town manager and director of finance, to find the necessary resources to accomplish this.

5. Downtown/waterfront hotels

Challenge:

In a few short months Plymouth 400 begins. It is predicted that we could see upwards of 1 million visitors. Where are they going to stay? I realize that the Plymouth 400 folks are doing the best they can with what they have available. However let's look at the situation. There is one hotel along the downtown area of Court Street, the 1620 Hotel. There used to be the Gov. Bradford hotel on Water Street, but that is being torn down and replaced with a condominium complex with some commercial use on the first floor. The new building diagonally across the road from the waterfront East Bay Grille is also a condominium project. If Plymouth wants to become more of a destination community for tourists in the future, we need more places for them to stay downtown and on the waterfront, not condominiums! These were poor decisions by the town. Waterfront property is prime real estate for a community. There should be more hotels located in the parts of the community tourists come to visit, not located out in the hinterland. When tourists visit a community, and particularly one with a nice waterfront, they want to stay in the center of the community or as close to it as possible, so they can walk everywhere. Not so in Plymouth! This year's visitors will not be able to do that, They will have to stay in the hotels at Exits 5, 6 and 7, and elsewhere much further away, and likely have to be bused to the downtown area. This is because of a lack of appropriate long term planning and execution over many years to plan for this event, and as we move on to the next decade(s) to promote and realize Plymouth as a destination vacation location.

Proposed solution:

Begin a new effort with all of the local and regional economic planning and development organizations to meet and work together, on a regular basis, together with the Plymouth Board of Planning, Plymouth director of economic development and any other appropriate organizations

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and officials to develop and implement a new plan for economic development for Plymouth. The Plymouth director of economic development position has been battered back and forth for years as to who pays for the position and what authority it has. That needs to change! It should be a permanent community position paid for by the town and charged with working with all other relevant officials and organizations to achieve the kind of economic development Plymouth needs to take us into the future. The current way of doing things doesn't work and won't for the future. Also, the Plymouth Board of Planning needs to meet more than twice a year, unless that has changed. If they are properly coordinating the economic development needs of the town, they should be meeting with all relevant parties on a regular basis. In a city form of government, that would happen!

6. Waterfront seawall repair and promenade

Challenge:

A year or so ago the director of the DPW made a presentation on repairing the failing seawall that is desperate need of major repair. The presentation included a proposed new two level promenade, which was very attractive and would have significantly improved the appearance and utility of that entire area. The proposal, although well thought out and needed, was ill timed. The town was still caught up in the sewer main break and the very expensive, unplanned for, repair project. The need for the seawall repair and promenade, however, still exists. It would serve as both a safety measure protecting our waterfront in that area against the increasing threats from sea level rise and a seemingly related increasing number of severe storms that better our waterfront, and a visual tourist attraction to help lure more tourists to our town's waterfront.

Proposed solution:

Yes, the funds necessary for these projects will need to be found. That is why the director of finance, the director of planning, the director of the DPW, the town manager and the local and regional economic development organizations, all need to work together to find the funds necessary to complete this project.

7. Town employee compensation

Challenge:

Plymouth employee pay and benefits compensation represents about 70 percent of the town's budget. Those employees work hard and are due fair compensation for what they do. But what constitutes "fair?" Town employees receive more benefits than federal employees. Over the past decade of so inflation rates have been historically low, yet town employees have consistently received annual raises significantly above the rate of inflation. Federal employees did not! Did you? There is also a \$700 million unfunded liability for retiree benefits. How did all of this occur? All of this did not occur overnight. It is the result of poor union contract negotiations by the town manager for non- school dept. employees, and by the School Department for public school employees, as well as by our elected officials pandering to that part of the electorate for their votes. Who is paying for, and will have to pay for, all of this now and in the future? You are and will! Are you, the town's nonpublic employees receiving similar pay and benefits from your private sector employers? I suspect not, but you still have to pay for theirs. Did you also know that TMMs, who may also be town employees, may vote for their own pay and benefit increases without having it considered a conflict of interest? Why, because their unions got them exempted from state conflict of interest laws. How many of you get to do that within the private companies you work for?



Proposed solution:

The town manager and school board must do a better job of negotiating public employee union contracts for the benefit of the town's non-employee taxpayers, so that public employees pay more of their share of their costs. TMMs must do a better job of scrutinizing such proposed pay and benefits before they vote on them, so as to benefit the town as a whole and not just the public employees.

8. Public building maintenance

Challenge:

Recent public stories have shown a broken system with either no such maintenance plan, or one that has not been managed properly resulting in health and safety exposure to some of our town employees. This is unconscionable!

Proposed solution:

Develop such a plan and implement it as appropriate. It should include all maintenance, repair and replacement of all town public buildings, their machinery and equipment. The town's recent facilities manager had developed a recent plan and then was forced out for it. Where is that plan now? Publish an annual report as part of the budget process of the details of the implementation of that plan, against the plan specifics, as appropriate.

The above are simply a shotgun version of the challenges and proposed solutions facing Plymouth for the next decades, and not necessarily in any order of priority. They are controversial and will be in need of much open public discussion and debate in order to arrive at substantive compromise conclusions that will benefit the town overall, and not just some special interest groups. There are likely many people in Plymouth who are smarter and more creative than I, so I challenge them to offer their own solutions to the challenges facing Plymouth for our future. When, and if, they are presented they, they should be consolidated and discussed publically with full transparency, to try and work out agreements on the best and most practical solutions, so as to be able to move our great community of Plymouth forward in this new decade. This will require maximum transparency, commitment and cooperation from all parties and a willingness for all parties to bring something of substance to the negotiating table. The attitude of "If it was good enough for the Pilgrims on the Mayflower, it still is," needs to end!

We need to move on to a better future for Plymouth, but we need to do it together! The beginning of this new decade is the perfect time to start.

Happy New Year.

PlymouthFirst, Inc. is a community organization that encourages the informed and active participation of Plymouth citizens in local government, works to increase understanding of municipal public policy issues and promotes these ideals through education and advocacy.

