

# TOWN OF BRIDGEWATER



# STATE OF THE TOWN ADDRESS

Michael Dutton, Town Manager

TOWN OF BRIDGEWATER, 66 CENTRAL SQUARE, BRIDGEWATER MA 02324

Senator Pacheco,  
Representative D'Emilia,  
President Fitzgibbons,  
President Clark,  
Regional School District Board members,  
Honored guests,  
And citizens of Bridgewater;

Good evening and thank you for either attending or listening to our annual state-of-the-Town address over the BTV airwaves or our website.

More importantly, thank you for giving me the opportunity and challenge of working for a Town with such vitality and volunteerism, with such dedicated employees, and such caring volunteers.

Over four years ago I set out to bring a new culture of professionalism to the Town. I also set out to stabilize our finances and show our taxpayers that every dime they give us is well spent.

I told the Town Council that it would take five years of diligent work to turn the corner, and I am happy to report that today we are a professional organization, our finances are stabilized, and our Town is headed in the right direction.

I would like to begin my portion of tonight's State of the Town address by highlighting areas in which the Town made significant progress throughout 2017, and then lay out my thoughts about our agenda for 2018 and beyond.

2017 was a good year, but a year marked with some sadness.

2017 saw the passing of our Conservation Commission chair Dick Monteith. He was a reliable and respected leader who was committed to a better Bridgewater. I will miss his calm approach to difficult issues, and his obvious love of teaching.

But 2017 also saw good things. We wished longtime Town attorney Mark Gildea success as a newly appointed Superior Court judge. Mark's work week used to start on Sundays and continued through Saturday. 16 or 18 hour days. 6 or 7 days a week... I suspect his new position allows him just a little more free time.

Since our last gathering, Councilor Kevin Perry had to give up his seat on the Council because he and his family moved to a different precinct. I appreciated Kevin's steady demeanor and thoughtful approach to town issues, and will miss his free medical advice...

We welcomed several new department heads: Steve Solari joined us as our Building Official early last year. He quickly worked through the backlog of permits and continues to implement a customer friendly approach to his work. Scott Bois joined us as Collector-Treasurer from the Southfield Redevelopment Authority where he ran its financial operations. In his short time, he has already proved to be a valuable team member who brings a deep municipal knowledge and

curiosity about municipal finance and government operations. He will join a finance team that we have very methodically built over the past several years.

Angela Chandler, who joined us as the interim Collector-Treasurer during 2016, is staying on as a consultant to fully implement a number of finance initiatives. During her service as interim, she dug into ongoing problems and made sure we were pointed in the right direction.

We have also recently welcomed Jennifer Burke who steps into the role of Community and Economic Development Director. Jennifer has experience and expertise which will directly benefit our downtown and economic development efforts. I look forward to working closely with her to take our development plans and ideas and turn them into reality.

Finally, I looked inward to fill the position of Assistant Town Manager. Kim Williams has been a steady presence in Bridgewater town offices for over 20 years. Her dedication to the Bridgewater cause has been unparalleled and she has seamlessly stepped into her new position. I have given her a full plate of work, and she consistently outperforms her state-wide peers.

In 2017 the Town Council approved changes to the Town Charter which, if approved by the legislature and the voters, will make needed changes to the way we conduct business and streamline and clarify the way we do our work. The process began several years ago, prior to Councilors Losche and Gallagher's first election to the Council. They served on the Town's first Charter Committee and were instrumental in making recommendations to the Council. While the Charter change process proved to be very lengthy, it is working exactly the way it should. Methodically and with great care – just as any constitutional change should.

We have continued to implement the new Administrative Code. This has meant changes to committee and staff roles. In some respects, it has been a challenging transition which has sometimes been met with resistance. But I think we have guided these changes with great sensitivity to how things used to be done, and to the folks who have seen their roles shift on their boards and committees.

On the labor front, in 2017 we negotiated three collective bargaining agreements with our employees which finalized our transition to a well-defined and consistent salary matrix. We have ensured that all bargaining unit employees are paid fairly, and we have made changes to agreements which ensure that employees can be stable in their positions. I want to take a moment to recognize our bargaining units – especially the firefighters, police officers, and our DPW employees – for being full participants in our efforts to stabilize and strengthen the Town's fiscal health and our future together.

In 2017 we continued to focus on our hiring process, and the thoughtful approach we used to fill every vacancy. We spent a lot of time and effort to centralize and formalize a process that has for years been an afterthought. We have recognized how important it is to hire the right people at the right time to do the right job. We also recognize how important it is to hold employees accountable for their work product, and how critical it is to document performance.

In 2017 we achieved a milestone in the lengthy process to repair and rebuild the Mitchell School. The Massachusetts School Building Authority accepted the Town into its competitive grant funding program, and the Town's voters approved the first step in making sure we create a learning space safe and suitable for Bridgewater's children.

In 2017 we grappled with the issues of recreational marijuana. We created a Marijuana Ad Hoc Committee which has provided steady and well-informed advice on a whole host of issues related to the use of recreational marijuana. While the Council was fairly split on most of the major components, it eventually voted to ban the retail sales of recreational marijuana in Bridgewater but allow the wholesale components of this new industry. Now that the state's Cannabis Control Commission has released its regulations, we will likely have more work to do in the coming months.

But, more importantly, the marijuana issue highlighted something that has been talked about since Bridgewater's change of government. With this particular issue, residents have found that they have a voice, and that they can advocate for what they believe is right. It has also helped to properly draw a sharp distinction between the policy setting role of the Council, and the operational role of the Town Manager and the staff. This form of government thrives when those roles are clearly defined and delineated.

In 2017, we hoped that we would secure grant funding to rebuild Elm Street, our major industrial corridor. Unfortunately, that did not happen. In the place of grant funding, we are now looking at several financing options which we can use to get this project done – including district infrastructure financing which is before the Council tonight for review.

But this project and the hard work we have done to secure grant funding has highlighted another issue which has been brewing for several years, and which professional municipal managers have been dreading but expecting. The federal government's recently unveiled infrastructure initiative has already laid the groundwork for shifting the burden of infrastructure to state and local governments. This will place enormous pressure on Bridgewater. The funding we dedicate to road reconstruction and maintenance is already anemic. Now we know we cannot rely on federal and state funding to make drastically needed improvements to our infrastructure – meaning roads, bridges, and sidewalks. Regardless, we will turn over every rock to find any available funding for Bridgewater.

In 2017 we saw three large affordable housing projects make application to the Zoning Board of Appeals to construct over 500 units of housing in Bridgewater. Chapter 40B is a state law which requires all cities and towns in Massachusetts to achieve a minimum threshold of 10% of their housing stock as affordable. 40B allows developers to avoid most local zoning regulations and density requirements in return for providing at least 25% of their new units as affordable. Bridgewater has roughly 8,500 units of housing which means we need to have roughly 850 affordable units. If all three developments are approved by the ZBA and come to fruition, we will exceed the 850 required units. This means Bridgewater will have much more control over its affordable housing development.

In 2017 we finalized the update to our Open Space and Recreation Plan with a special look at our passive recreational resources. We also asked one of our BSU interns to create a plan to implement the Open Space and Rec Plan knowing we do not have the resources to do what the plan calls for. Anthony Hebert created a well-thought-out plan which plots a course using volunteers and limited Town staff. Partly because of his great work, I just appointed Anthony to the Finance Committee. Sitting on the Finance Committee is the best way to learn the detailed ins-and-outs of municipal government.

In 2017, we asked OCPC to tackle the update to our 5-year-old Housing Production Plan. The Plan is important to complete because it insulates the Town from unwise affordable housing developments, and it qualifies us for grant funding that might not otherwise be available. OCPC produced a sound plan which defines the kinds of developments and redevelopments we really want to focus on. It also gives the Affordable Housing Trust a guide for its work.

In 2017 we completed work on phase two of our Complete Streets program. Our engineers compiled and ranked dozens of areas, mostly in the central business district, that were in dire need of upgrading or reconstruction. The list includes such things as sidewalk reconstruction, traffic light installation, crosswalk placements, and intersection realignments. The total cost of almost \$4 million only begins to address the overall needs in Town. Again, we were not successful in securing grant funding in 2017 for the first phase of construction, but we will continue to press for Complete Streets grant funding of up to \$400,000 per year in each of the next several years as long as the program continues.

In 2017, with the Council's support, we put the long abandoned McElwain School out for bid. This important historic structure is on the National Historic Record and is an integral part of Bridgewater's history as a factory town during the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Frankly I was assuming the building would be highly desirable due to the state and federal historic tax credits that are attached to the building's renovation. I assumed wrong. We received one bid which matched the request for proposal. We continue to analyze that bid and its benefits for Bridgewater. Regardless, it is imperative that we sell the building or begin the expensive and lengthy process to tear it down. It is too big a liability in its current state.

In 2017 with a new Finance Director and a solid team in place, we laser focused on our outstanding financial issues. We began long-overdue efforts to collect outstanding taxes. Our efforts proved fruitful. Working with the Finance team, our legal department consisting of Mark Gildea and Jason Rawlins were successful in their efforts to collect outstanding taxes owed on the Route 24 rest areas which are taxable but not lien-able. For those who are unfamiliar with municipal finance, this is a rare feat for which our team and both lawyers deserve tremendous credit.

Tony Sulmonte, our Finance Director, used 2017 to implement processes and systems which should become routine in future years. He has given us access to data we can use to make important decisions about the future of Bridgewater. Whether it is decisions on zoning, road repairs, marijuana, housing, or our relationship with BSU and the Department of Corrections, all involve financial considerations. Our ability to access solid financial data and apply it to a decision-making process is the mark of a fiscally mature community. I think we are almost

there. Tony has developed a dynamic 5-year financial outlook which allows us to show the Council, the Finance Committee, team leaders, employees, and residents where we will be in five years, and the impact of collective bargaining contracts, health care costs, pension assessments, and residential and commercial development on our budgets. Of all the progress we have made over the past few years, this is probably the most important. Again, we are elevating the level of professionalism by which we operate.

In 2017 we filed suit against the Environmental Protection Agency and the Massachusetts Department of Environmental Protection. At issue was the EPA's new five-year sewer discharge permit that required Bridgewater to make drastic upgrades to its sewer system within a very short period. We strenuously objected because we felt the timeline was far too aggressive and would place a huge burden on the ratepayers too quickly. After several months of litigation and high-level settlement discussions, the EPA and DEP agreed to extend the implementation schedule to 10 years. Furthermore, we successfully argued that a 15-year timetable would be more appropriate if the 10 year schedule places an overly burdensome obligation on those who cannot afford it. It was unfortunate that it took litigation with our federal and state partners to settle our differences, but that is sometimes the route we must go to do what we think is right.

In 2017, with the help of our Water and Sewer Board, we finally designed a fix for the rusty water that has plagued Bridgewater for generations. We proposed a new \$7 million water treatment plant which will be built off of High Street to treat water being pumped from the High Street wells. At the end of 2017, with valuable guidance from DEP and our engineers, we delayed the project by one year so we could redesign the project to include renovations to the wells, new storage and office space, and improvements to the water distribution garage.

In 2017 we thrust ourselves into the 21<sup>st</sup> century by rolling out our water meter replacement program. The new water meters will not require annual visits to resident's homes. Rather, meters can be read electronically, and water bills processed automatically – eliminating human error. Residents and businesses can also track their own water usage from their computer or smart phone.

In 2017, after some delays, we finished long overdue upgrades to the Senior Center's kitchen and bathrooms. This is only a couple of many needed building improvements.

2017 was the first full year of the new Public Records law. Passed by the legislature arguably to punish public agencies that stonewall requests for information, the law places a huge and costly burden on towns like Bridgewater. We honored over 100 public records requests in 2017 and spent 100s of staff hours researching and generating documents. Most of these were frivolous requests designed only to test our willingness to provide public records. As I have said to our team leaders many times, almost any document we have is a public document available for anyone who asks. The legislature would have been more helpful if, instead of creating more unfunded mandates on cities and towns, it created guidelines for the placement of records on our websites. If it created guidelines and conventions for the electronic storage of documents. The unintended consequence of this public records law is lost productivity, lost efficiency, and expense for towns like ours.

2017 saw the formalization of the group known as the Citizens for Civility and Respect in Bridgewater. Created after an unfortunate racially charged incident in Town, a group of concerned residents came together to look for ways to build cultural understanding and respect for people of every religion and background.

In 2017 the Bridgewater Improvement Association let us know that it had to scale back its contribution towards keeping the Common and the downtown areas maintained. We worked with the Association to arrange a plan that would keep them involved in keeping the Common maintained but placed the fiscal responsibility on the Town to maintain our other parks and grounds. The BIA will refocus its attention to building its endowment so it can strength its long-term ability to maintain its park and the Common.

2017 saw the formulation of a paid parking program which was approved by the Council early this year. The plan targets an unmet need. Students and staff look for parking close to campus. So we have targeted parking areas which are not used by Bridgewater residents or local businesses. While it may seem like a relatively small thing, it is a step on the way to building a fund to address the many infrastructure needs of the Town. For instance, the revenue derived from paid parking can fund engineering costs for many sidewalk projects, parking lot improvements, and even parking garages.

In 2017 we made strides in curbing the opioid crisis. With BSU, and several other partners, we continue to participate in the Bridging LIVES Coalition and the Plymouth County Opioid Awareness Coalition. We assigned officers to conduct overdose follow-up visits with a recovery coach. We also were recently awarded a Jail Diversion Grant by DPH to hire a clinician to ride along with officers to respond to issues of mental health or substance abuse and provide social service or treatment referrals.

In 2017 the Council approved a funding request to pay for a broad comprehensive re-zoning effort which will begin later this spring with a build-out analysis and culminate with a comprehensive set of zoning ordinances to be adopted by the Town Council. This effort is critical to the long-term growth of Bridgewater. It is critical to how we shape and encourage the growth we want, and curb the growth we don't want.

In 2017 we unveiled a cutting-edge web-based payment system which allows residents to pay real and personal property taxes and other fees from their smart phones or computers any time of day or night.

In 2017 we worked with the Wild and Scenic Taunton River to apply for federal funding to help us develop a long-term plan for our parks.

While we have been busy in 2017, our effectiveness depends on knowing where we are going. To set goals we need to know the end game. To that end, we have begun a strategic planning process which will help inform our future and give us a roadmap to get there. The process will include robust participation from residents and volunteers with guidance from staff.

But to continue to move forward, we are not awaiting the results of that strategic planning process. For 2018, I have set out a number of goals for myself and the staff.

In 2018 we must resolve the disposition of our empty buildings. I have proposed a disposition of the McElwain, and we will be starting construction on the upgrades to the Memorial Building. I will also be proposing a disposition of the Town Hall and the Spring Street garage.

In 2018 we will carefully analyze the contract renewal for Comcast.

We will be planning extensive water main replacements and planning for extensive road work throughout Town. I will challenge the Finance Department to propose ways to pay for road improvements which will likely include voter participation and capital exclusions.

We will discuss and decide how we will proceed with planning for the possible decommissioning of the High Street dam.

We will plan for downtown revitalization and look for ways to fund that. We will start by building public support and consensus for a solution that works for Bridgewater.

We will participate in a street light conversion project to improve lighting in the neighborhoods of Town and reduce our electrical usage.

We will rebuild Elm Street to provide the spark to industrial development which will begin to reduce the residential tax burden and spur new growth.

We will secure the threshold of 10% affordable housing and work to execute our housing production plan by developing affordable housing options that work for Bridgewater such as the McElwain proposal. We will be designated a Housing Choice Initiative town which will give us state funding priority.

We will continue to work towards a solution for the Mitchell School which ensures that Bridgewater children attend a safe school that fully implements the District's educational program.

We will work with the District to support its educational plan within the funding constraints of Prop 2 ½.

We will finish the first comprehensive capital plan we have ever done.

We will continue to build stability and professionalism by recruiting excellent staff, board and committee volunteers who want to do the best for Bridgewater.

Finally, I would be horribly remiss if I did not recognize some truly unsung heroes in the Town of Bridgewater. The accomplishments of Roadways Superintendent Ron Ladue and his small staff are stunning in light of the resources we can afford to give them. To give you an idea, generally Bridgewater spends a total of \$2,100 per person annually. The state average is \$4,100.

Other cities' and towns' DPWs spend an average of \$26,500 per road mile. Bridgewater spends less than half of that. \$12,000. The Roadways Department budget is almost back to the level it was in 2004. That is 14 years ago. What we ask our Roadways Department to do with few staff and few dollars is enormous and cannot be sustained. Regardless, Ron and his staff go at it every day give this Town 100%. For that, they are the unsung heroes of Bridgewater.

I will end on this note: I have never seen a more committed and dedicated group of employees and volunteer than I have in Bridgewater. I thank them for their commitment to public service. It's not always easy.

I also thank my assistant Michael Spagone who exemplifies the spirit of municipal government service. And Council Clerk Ann Holmberg who keeps the Council and me on an even keel and can answer any question I have day or night.

I ask that you give them and yourselves round of applause for the work you do on behalf of the Town of Bridgewater. Thank you and good night.