

In an interview with Town Administrator Libby Gibson, who may receive the title of Town Manager pending a vote at the 2008 Annual Town Meeting, she discussed four of the top issues facing the community next year.

A conversation with Libby Gibson Town Administrator

Town

Q. Voters will be asked to approve a \$27 to \$30 million debt exclusion override at the 2008 Annual Town Meeting to fund construction of the 2 Fairgrounds Road public safety facility. In light of other multi-million override requests in recent years, are residents being strained by these petitions? Is this facility needed and, if funded, where do you see it in its construction process by December of 2008?

A. "The Board of Selectmen is not [currently] discussing the purchase of 2 Candle St. [However] the public safety facility has been on the drawing board for at least five years, and for police and fire it has been on the drawing board for at least 15 years," said Gibson. "This is not a new concept, but now we are getting into the appropriation stage. There are a number of other infrastructure-related projects that have been on the so-called radar screen for years, as well."

"The [approximately \$40 million] Surfside Wastewater Treatment Plant upgrade was not funded solely by the [town] general fund; it was partially through the general fund, the enterprise fund and new users. I don't know if the voters will approve a safety facility. I hope they will take into account the need for a new facility for police and fire with the concept behind a joint facility to improve operations of both departments, cost savings in one building and coordination and communications improvements. Construction costs of municipal buildings such as this have escalated steeply, recently. It is beyond our control."

"We are exploring all opportunities to save money over the short term as related to this project. If the appropriation is approved we would, hopefully, go out to bid by the end of 2008. I think everyone in town government involved with financial planning knows there are a lot of capital projects in the future, but we are in the process of refining our capital planning and funding mechanisms. Nantucket property taxes are some of the lowest in the state. Nantucket has not faced dramatic budget cuts. Towns in the state have been asking for overrides — it is not unusual here."

Q. The selectmen will prioritize time in 2008 for strategic planning. Looking at the issues being addressed, such as affordable housing and traffic and parking problems, do you believe this planning process is coming too late to find solutions? Can the work be done without a comprehensive override or requests for annual overrides?

A. "I don't think any of this is too late. With traffic, a number of things have happened over the last decade to improve traffic congestion. The Nantucket Regional Transit Authority (NRTA) is one. Maybe the biggest things are bike path improvements, the roundabout and parking regulation changes. People simply haven't been able to agree on some larger concepts such as limiting cars, paid parking, off-street parking and parking limitations. I think the selectmen are trying to get past the discussion stage."

"Housing is another area people can't agree on, but I think efforts have been made to improve affordable housing, and like it or not, the 40Bs we have on Nantucket have been able to provide people housing at below market rates. The Nantucket Housing Office has, from what I can tell, had very good low to moderate income rental programs. I believe the town can still help address these issues, with action in the near future."

Q. Departmental consolidation may occur in 2008. How would that work, which departments would be involved and why does this seem like a good idea?

A. "We are looking at three potential possibilities: Code enforcement agencies such as the Historic District Commission, the Building Department, the Conservation Commission and the Health Department. Each department would become a division of code enforcement headed by one department head."

Gibson said this sweeping change may also comprise Human Services, the Council on Aging, Our Island Home, and possibly Parks and Recreation and Visitor Services.

The third possibility for change would involve the public safety department and divisions of the police, fire department and emergency management, utilizing central communications. Consolidations, said Gibson, would allow divisions to work more closely and reduce the number of direct reports to the Town Administrator.

"It's in the concept stage right now," said Gibson. "I'm just considering it."

Q. Town Counsel Paul DeRensis's contract expires at the end of June 2008 and the town must decide whether or not to renew their agreement. DeRensis has served as Town Counsel for 20 years and is paid a \$95,000 annual retainer for most legal services; however, there is an additional cost to the town for services through his firm for certain litigation, real estate matters and labor contract issues. Those types of matters are billed at \$175 per hour.

A. Gibson said there are a number of issues the town will consider regarding the contract renewal including cost, quality of service, DeRensis's institutional knowledge and the litigation volume which will be analyzed for appropriateness.

"These are all things to take into consideration either way," said Gibson. "Seeing who else is out there after 20 years is not a bad idea. You might end up where you are now, but it doesn't hurt to see what else is out there. Depending on what priorities the town has and the level of satisfaction with the current situation you may or may not decide to look around."

Gibson said few towns pay their legal counsel less than Nantucket pays, and that there is no way to know if the island could obtain a new and satisfactory attorney until the position is put out to bid.

Happy New Year!



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