

**MILFORD  
DAILY NEWS**

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**COUNTY**

# 'Turbulent' road ahead for Franklin

*Schools eye layoffs, town bracing for reductions*

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FRANKLIN - Anticipated bumps in the town's financial road are giving way to potholes as the town enters a new fiscal year on July 1.

In the face of significant economic impacts stemming from the COVID-19 global pandemic, Town Administrator Jamie Hellen said the town is bracing to travel "a turbulent road" - but how turbulent will depend on the level of cuts that may trickle down in local aid from the state, and the total fallout from loss of local receipts during the economic shutdown.

"The bottom line is FY21 will be a very turbulent road, if not a devastating one that will likely have far reaching effects on the service delivery to the community," Hellen wrote in his executive summary as part of the town's initial \$131.8 million budget plan.

He also said the situation will "require every department to develop new protocols, question spending, rethink service delivery and prepare for uncharted territory. The situation will also require significant engagement from all stakeholders and citizens in the community."

The Town Council is holding a pair of sessions Wednesday and Thursday to discuss the budget and the forecast in an unprecedented setting: outside at Pisini Stadium at Franklin High School, 218 Oak St.

## **School layoffs**

The bleak fiscal situation became clear last week as, in the face of potentially significant layoffs, dozens of teachers and their supporters turned out to demonstrate in the town center.

The demonstration occurred after the School Department found itself in the difficult position of having to advise 103 of its employees that they may no longer have jobs in the 2020-21 school year - not to mention the lingering questions regarding how school will reopen in the

fall and how it will meet, with fewer resources, the social-distance guidelines that the state Department of Elementary and Secondary Education is now suggesting.

"We reluctantly issued non-renew notices to our non-professional status educators in order to meet the statutory deadline of June 15," Superintendent of Schools Sara Ahern wrote in an email on June 11. "We did so because of the uncertainty of budget cuts and projected reductions in state aid."

The School Department has already been working to close a \$3.4 million gap, which has the potential to widen even further as the impacts of the pandemic shake down.

"Due to COVID and the shortfall in state revenue, we anticipate that this budget gap will grow when we know more about Chapter 70 state aid to Franklin," Ahern said.

The notifications were issued so those employees would have a fair warning that their jobs may not survive the financial turmoil - a procedural step made with the expectation that it will give officials time to work through the potential reductions.

"We anticipate and are hopeful about re-appointing some of these staff members and will do so as soon as we are able," Ahern said.

### **Municipal balancing act**

On the municipal side, Hellen said he has planned for a nearly \$2 million drop in local receipts - those include things like revenue from meals and hotel taxes, excise taxes and income from any new growth.

Because of a newly drafted inter-municipal agreement with Millville and Mendon allowing those towns to join the Metacomet Regional Dispatch Center - already serving Franklin, Norfolk, Wrentham and Plainville - the town will have access to grant funds that will reduce its dispatch center-related costs over the next four years, and also reduce its annual assessment. That should lock into place once Millville and Mendon officials vote on the agreement sometime next week. Member towns unanimously approved the plan on Monday.

As a result of those savings, Hellen said, the town is avoiding municipal layoffs, at least initially.

The budget is balanced on expense reductions - most notably in the Recreation Department, with a 25% reduction recommended because it can't offer the same level of programming due to the coronavirus, and taking into account that the department is self-funding and can

contribute to its own operations with user fees once activity shifts back to a more normal pace.

The DPW takes some expense reductions as well. In addition, the town furloughed or reduced the hours of some employees, Hellen said.

The budget plan does not make any reductions to police, fire or library services, and it adds \$15,000 to the Health Department to help with its continued COVID-19 response.

### **Only the 'first round'**

But Hellen stressed the current budget proposal is "only the first round." He anticipates officials will have to come back to the budget later this fall once the state has finished its budget plan and the town has a better picture of what revenue is coming from Beacon Hill.

This is where the careful balancing act could get knocked off kilter and force deeper cutbacks, both to the school and municipal budgets.

It's a difficult situation considering there was already a structural deficit to contend with, largely based on high demand on services, unfunded state and federal mandates, higher expenses in areas like health insurance, and high expectations put on the school district.

Hellen estimates that even a 5% reduction in state aid will force further cuts to the town's fiscal 2021 omnibus budget amounting to \$1.6 million. A 10% reduction would equate to \$3.2 million more to trim out; 15% would equate to \$4.8 million and a 20% reduction would equate to \$6.5 million in further town budget cuts.

On June 10, Hellen and Ahern sent a letter to the town's legislative delegation on Beacon Hill urging their support in preserving as much of the local aid in the state fiscal '21 budget as possible.

"As we approach many of the economic realities ready to set in as this crisis unfolds, it is clear that any cuts will have a devastating impact in the quantity and quality of the services Franklin residents require," the letter reads.

The fiscal outlook for fiscal '22 and '23 is also looking to be difficult, officials said.

### **An override in Franklin?**

In light of the town's precarious budgeting situation and impending school layoffs, there has been some chatter among citizens on social media about the prospect of passing a

Proposition 2 1/2 override - under state law, towns may seek voter approval to raise taxes over the 2.5% cap allowed annually to address significant financial challenges.

There is no formal proposal to seek an override, but if such a measure was to be put before voters and was successful, the funds would not be available to help address the financial troubles for the upcoming fiscal year. That's because towns must adopt a balanced budget for the next fiscal year by the end of June.

Hellen said citizens and stakeholders will have to decide whether putting an override on the table is ultimately the best solution, but he feels the town is not at that point. There are restructuring steps that should be examined first - such as the highly successful ones already taken in the public safety departments to reduce overtime and realize more financial efficiencies.

Ultimately, Hellen said, "citizen engagement is required to be at an all-time high if we are going to make it through this."