

MINUTES
Communications Committee
Wednesday, June 12, 2024 – 4:00pm

Item 1. Call to Order. Councilor Sither called to order the meeting at 4:00pm.

Item 2. Roll Call. In Attendance was Councilor April Sither, Councilor Jon Anderson as well as Councilor Donald Cushing. Also, in attendance was Allison Carrier (Communications Manager), Liam Gallagher (Assistant Town Manager) and Nick Cloutier (Town Assessor).

Item 3. Approval of Minutes: May 8, 2024. Motion by Councilor Anderson, seconded by Councilor Cushing to approve meeting minutes from 05/08/2024.

Vote: 3 Yeas.

Item 4. Discussion of authors and topics for upcoming Council Corner Articles & Council Corner Live. Committee decided that Councilor Sither & Councilor McGee will write June 15th regarding the School Building Committee, Councilor Cushing will write the July 1st article and possibly Councilor Shupe for July 15th. Committee discussed a Council Corner live on July 18th in regards to Land Conservation such as the 30x30 Goal or the Land Bond.

Motion by Council Cushing and seconded by Councilor Anderson, to add a Revaluation Update to the agenda.

Revaluation Update. Nick Cloutier, Town Assessor spoke in regards to the revaluation and answered committee questions.

Item 5. Website Analytics. Allison Carrier provided overview and slide show. Conversation ensued among committee members.

Item 6. Budget Process & Budget Round Table. Councilor Anderson spoke on what he would like to see done going forward as well as what has worked in the past.

Item 7. Communications Policy. Committee agreed to continue working on the policy.

Item 8. Public Comment. No Public Comment.

Item 9. Future Agenda Items.

- Communications Policy.

Item 10. Adjourn. Councilor Sither called the meeting to adjourn at 5:49pm.

Respectively,

Katie Duross (transcribed via video)
Deputy Town Clerk

Collaborative Communications Builds Trust in Our Local Governments Scarborough Town Council Communications Committee

Throughout this year's revaluation in Scarborough, the Council Communications Committee had the pleasure of partnering with our Town Assessor, Nick Cloutier, as we navigated this sometimes challenging process. Given the housing shortage in Maine, a drastic spike in home values, and being a desirable coastal community near Portland, we knew there was going to be a significant change in home values. Five years ago, Scarborough conducted our first revaluation in 15 years with the assistance of a contracted third party, which for many residents was not a good experience. With that negative experience still very fresh in the minds of many residents, we as elected officials acknowledged that we were facing a fair amount of skepticism and distrust. Additionally, the repeal of the State's Senior State Tax Stabilization program, which impacted 1,800 Scarborough residents, only added insult to an already open wound by increasing their tax bills by nearly 4%. While Scarborough boasts a diverse tax base with nearly 25% of our 2023 taxes paid by commercial properties, the higher rate of increased residential valuation shifted more taxes to residents, resulting in an average of a 4.75% tax bill increase for residents. For some residents it was a true triple whammy. Many of our most vulnerable residents could anticipate a 8.75% increase in their tax bills, and all of this prior to setting the FY25 municipal and school budgets.

Throughout the revaluation, credible, consistent, and empathetic communications were critical. The Assessor, Town Management, and Town Council partnered collaboratively throughout the process to maximize impact and build trust in our local government. All Town channels were effectively utilized - Town website, FAQs, social media, Council meetings, Council workshops, Council committee meetings, mailings, and resident roundtables. Although the revaluation is State mandated, everyone involved appreciated the emotional impact a tax change can have on individuals, particularly when taxes go up significantly. It was important that we not only communicated the facts, but that we led with empathy for those who would see a double digit percent increase on their tax bill. Throughout the development of the communications plan, staff collaborated with Council to get our input; a process that started nearly nine months before residents received their new valuation. The key to rebuilding trust was to ensure that it wasn't a "one and done" communication. Together we built a strategic plan that was carried out over many months, which included evolving messaging relevant at that time in the process.

As we learned more about the revaluation, it significantly impacted and drove our choices around the budget process this year. One of our biggest hurdles was accepting that some residents were going to conflate the budget and the revaluation because ultimately both impact what residents see in their tax bills. The only thing the Council could control was how much we would spend in our FY25 budget. This fact became central to our messaging. Ultimately, because our assessor had done such a thorough job explaining the anticipated impacts of the revaluation to the Council, we approved a budget that, by itself, resulted in a modest 1.47% tax increase. Our effort to mitigate as much of the impact of the revaluation as possible resulted in a new estimated mil rate of approximately \$11.05. Throughout the revaluation process, the consistent messaging across various channels was key, but perhaps the most impactful aspect

was Nick Cloutier's commitment to our residents. Nick met with residents "where they were" both figuratively and literally over the course of many months. He engaged with influential groups - PACs, Homeowners Associations, Community Groups, etc. Additionally, Nick held several roundtables throughout neighborhoods which opened doors and enabled the Council to have follow-up engagements centered around the budget. Of notable mention, Nick's connections led us to a round table at our senior manufactured home community - a group that had perhaps the most negative past experience and who are mostly on fixed incomes. Given that Nick had laid the foundation for factual information about the revaluation, it allowed us to focus more on the budget specifics that were being proposed this year. This complementary conversation helped us to advance the residents' understanding of the relationship between the revaluation and the budget, and hopefully allay some of their concerns. The Council Communications Committee is now looking to replicate the model we used on the revaluation led by Nick on other significant topics to bring our community along.

Anytime there is change, particularly as it relates to people's taxes, it's important for the Assessor to collaborate with Town Management and the Town Council. Nick brought credibility and technical expertise to the conversation, while the Council's contribution primarily focused on how to simplify the message in layman terms based on what we were hearing from residents and how we wanted to build on that message as we went into the budget process. Not only were we able to educate residents in our communications, but also continuously focus on what was next and set expectations. Letting people know the facts, but also following through on their expectations, was a critical component to bringing our community along.

At our Town Council meeting in early June, as Nick concluded his presentation of the results of the revaluation, the room roared in applause! This gesture, intended to thank him for his transparency and commitment to communication, also demonstrated our residents' appreciation of the care he gave to every resident throughout the process. Credible, consistent and empathetic messaging can only be achieved with collaboration from various stakeholders within the Town. Nick brought the expertise, facts, and details that gave credibility to our messaging. Town Management ensured the communications resources and channels are available with consistent quality communications over several months. And the Council brought the perspective of the residents to support simplicity and empathy in the messaging. As a Council, we are so fortunate to have staff that shared our same vision. It was truly a team effort.