

# ACTON MUNICIPAL PROPERTIES DEPARTMENT

## INTERDEPARTMENTAL COMMUNICATION

---

**To:** John Murray, Assistant Town Manager  
**From:** Dean A. Charter, Municipal Properties Director  
**Subject:** Budget Questions from Mr. Ashton

---

**Date:** 1/7/04

Selectman Ashton has posed several questions in anticipation of the budget hearing on Saturday; here are my thoughts on the question that have an impact upon the Municipal Properties Department:

### “NEEDS”

The Five Year Capital Plan is very dynamic, in that needed projects that are not funded one year are rolled into subsequent years, with simultaneous degradation of equipment and facilities, resulting in an eventual tsunami of imperative capital requests that must be dealt with. With that general observation on the lack of a credible capital improvement plan for the second year in a row out of the way, let me focus on the operating budget “needs” increases.

The simple fact is that Acton continues to grow, and that growth must be accommodated, often in obscure ways. For example, there are about 105 miles of town maintained roads in Acton, and about 30 miles of town maintained sidewalk. A bit less than half of the total road miles are old colonial era “Two-Rod” (33 foot right of way) roads, with the rest being subdivision roads built in the last fifty years. Subdivision roads are clear cut to the full width of the right of way (usually forty feet) when the roads are built, and thus there are few street tree related issues for quite a number of years after construction. Eventually, trees outside of the cut zone grow into the airspace over the road, and volunteer and deliberately planted growth gets established in the right of way itself. The older “Jenks” subdivisions, such as Indian Village and Robbins Park are good examples of this phenomenon. Although there was a multi-year lag, we are now faced with a drastic increase in the need for trimming, safety pruning, and removal of trees in highly visible areas, and this is causing an increasing work load for our Tree crew. By the same token, the rapidly increasing number of miles of sidewalk require a great deal of labor intensive hand trimming to keep these narrow swaths open to pedestrian traffic. We contract for a hired aerial lift truck for most of our tree work, and the rates have escalated from \$460 per day in FY '01 to \$600 per day for FY '05 (multi-year contract). Thus we have to increase our budget just to keep the same number of days of work, without even taking into consideration the increased workload caused by the growth noted above.

As Acton grows, it also requires larger and more sophisticated facilities. For example, the Memorial Library now has a utility budget that is more than four times the cost of utilities prior to expansion and renovation. You can expect at least the same rate of increase with the Public Safety Facility when the new 25,000 square foot facility replaces the old 4500 square foot facility. Newer facilities are more expensive to maintain than the older ones in that, in addition to being larger, they have a number of sophisticated systems that need to be services, inspected, and maintained, such as elevators, sprinkler systems, climate control systems (the existing Police Station does not even have central air conditioning) and the like. Some of the increase in the Manager’s request is directly related to the new Public Safety Facility in that it funds a half year of a new Building Maintenance Person and a very small portion of the expected increased maintenance and utility costs of the new building. It does not begin to replace the Building Maintenance Person who was laid off in July 2003.

### STREET LIGHTS / OLAC

Moving to more energy efficient lights certainly make sense. For example, we were able to reduce our energy cost for traffic lights by \$2500 per year by replacing the incandescent bulbs with LEDs. The LEDs also have a dramatically longer service life, so we will also save on replacement costs, and have a more reliable system. In

addition, we have applied to NSTAR for rebates for the actual cost of installation, and may recover as much as 80% of our capital investment, which will be in the form of a credit balance on our account with NSTAR. This project was initiated and carried out by the Engineering Department, although the electricity costs are carried under Municipal Properties. The savings in traffic lights is being used to underwrite the higher costs of the expanded lighting at the commuter parking facility, so the combination of the two projects ended up pretty much revenue neutral as far as ongoing operational costs are considered.

There are several complications with instituting cost savings through street light conversion without using a consultant to help. It costs three hundred dollars to install a new Metal Halide (MH) light to replace the aging and inefficient Mercury Vapor (MV) lights. Some of this cost may be recoverable from NSTAR in the form of a rebate. Our ongoing electric consumption will be lower with the new fixture, but we will have to get NSTAR to adjust the billing (the individual lights are not metered, and we pay off one master bill). Changing a large number of lights at once is the most efficient way to do this, since we would have economies of scale with purchasing and installing the lights, and our contractor would only have to fill out one set of rebate forms, and make the argument once with NSTAR about the new rates. If we make the conversions on a piecemeal basis we will have to do several conversions, fill out the paperwork for rebates and rates, than wait for the rebates to come back so we will have enough money to do a few more conversions. This process could be very labor intensive, and would fall on me personally to accomplish. I do not envision having the time to tackle this project in Fiscal '05, since I am very preoccupied with the Public Safety Facility. The best I can offer is to try to work on the rebates and rate changes for any lights that we might be forced to replace due to age or condition, but you should not expect much financial impact from that.

#### **PSF BUILDING MAINTENANCE PERSON**

The full annual cost of this new employee will be around \$45,000 for salary, benefits, and incidentals, such as uniforms and the like. This cost obviously will increase from year to year as the person moves through the salary range. Since there is some question of exactly when in Fiscal '05 the new building will be ready (but certainly not prior to January 1, 2005), and since this will be a new hire, we have some latitude in exactly when the person starts, so I feel \$20,000 for Fiscal 05 will be sufficient.

#### **WOODLAWN CEMETERY SERVICE BUILDING**

Tom Tidman will address this question in more detail, but I have some knowledge of the issue in that I have handled the bid process for our first two tries. In broad strokes, we had an appropriation of \$100,000 to start with, of which a bit over \$90,000 remains now that we have designed the building, done the advertising, and cleared the site. In 2001 the lowest bid was for \$165,000. The architect redesigned the building at no charge, drastically reducing the scope of work. Lowest bid received in 2002 was \$129,000. I do not see any way the building can be further reduced and still be useful, so I suggested in August 2002 that the Cemetery Commissioners request an additional appropriation of \$55,000.