

2021

FEDERAL ISSUES PAPER

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March 2, 2021

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Washington, DC 20510

Senator Angus King
133 Hart Senate Office Building
Washington, DC 20510

Congresswoman Chellie Pingree
2162 Rayburn House Office Building
Washington, DC 20515

Congressman Jared Golden
1223 Longworth House Office Building
Washington, DC 20515

Dear Senator Collins, Senator King, Congresswoman Pingree, and Congressman Golden,

On behalf of the Maine Municipal Association's (MMA) Executive Committee, I am pleased to present our 2021 Federal Issues Paper.

Although traditionally this publication is used to show how your federal level investments and advocacy efforts benefit Maine town and cities, this year we have decided to deviate from that approach.

Because COVID-19 defined the lives of Maine residents for much of 2020, we thought it was fitting to spotlight the municipal response to the ongoing public health crisis. In the pages that follow you will read how municipal leaders from seven towns and cities stepped-up to the challenge to protect their communities.

It merits asserting that this change in approach has no impact on our appreciation for your support of important federal programs. The ongoing funding for housing, heating, community development and infrastructure improvement programs has not gone unnoticed. Nor has your support for CARES Act funding and subsequent federal stimulus packages.

We strongly agree with Bangor City Manager Cathy Conlow's observation that, "We have been very fortunate because of our federal delegation."

Due to your advocacy efforts, in 2020 Maine received \$1.75 in federal assistance for every dollar a resident or business contributed to the federal government for a total of \$17.4 billion.

Of Maine's \$1.25 billion share of Coronavirus Relief Funds under the federal CARES Act, 85% (\$1.06 billion) was used to help residents, businesses, schools, counties and municipalities.

In addition, \$420 million in federal revenue supported housing, heating and weatherization efforts. As a result of this investment, over 55,400 households and 36 shelters received much needed financial assistance.

Annual investments of roughly \$190 million continue to fund one-third of the state's transportation infrastructure improvement projects.

The \$18 million investment in Community Development Block Grants provided direct financial assistance to businesses; supported improvements to municipal parking facilities, sidewalks and water and sewer systems; and funded employment training, transportation services and child care programs.

Finally, of the \$16.5 million in federal broadband expansion assistance, \$10 million from the U.S. Department of Agriculture's ReConnect Pilot Program will create or improve broadband connectivity for 4,527 households and 215 business.

The words of Augusta City Manager Bill Bridgeo aptly summarize the extent of our gratitude for the good work that you do for Maine. "We have four wonderful congressional representatives, Senator Collins, Senator King, Congresswoman Pingree, and Congressman Golden. We don't have to tell them much about our needs, beyond giving them the ammunition they might need to carry it through the appropriations process in Congress. We are not fighting against federal, irrational, elected appointees. We've got champions in all four offices. We appreciate that."

We look forward to meeting with you remotely on March 10 (Senators King and Collins) and March 11 (Congressman Golden and Congresswoman Pingree) to express our gratitude for your efforts, to discuss the trials and tribulations we have faced over the last year and to plan our recovery, together.

Sincerely,

James Gardner, Jr.
Easton Town Manager
President, MMA Executive Committee

WINDOWS INTO THE PANDEMIC

The pandemic impacts every municipality in Maine. Many of these impacts are common across the state. Towns and cities are suffering revenue losses, encountering unexpected expenditures, making adjustments to municipal services, and engaging in some form of emergency planning. Other impacts, like staffing or housing shortages and budget deficits, are more prominent in certain municipalities. The 2021 Federal Issues Paper explores the different ways municipalities are navigating the pandemic, what impacts are still being felt, the lessons learned from this crisis, and what remains to be done at the municipal, state, and federal levels.

“We are trying to be everything to everyone. We are stretched thin.”
– Bangor City Manager Cathy Conlow

Seven municipalities are highlighted in this paper: Augusta, Bangor, Brunswick, Gardiner, Monmouth, Standish, and Vinalhaven. Summaries of the full interviews with participating municipal leaders can be found on the MMA website. What follows are highlights from each interview.

AUGUSTA

The human impact of the pandemic on Augusta’s municipal employees has been severe. To date, 32 employees have been laid off, and the police department, code enforcement, library, and day care program are all short staffed. Meanwhile, overtime costs are soaring as employees miss work due to exposure incidents.

The city’s code enforcement office demonstrates the pandemic’s strain on municipal employees. City Manager Bill Bridgeo explains, “In ordinary times we have three full-time code enforcement officers. Last spring, one of the things that we had to do was eliminate one of those positions. Layoff a very capable code enforcement officer, which are damn hard to find. Now two individuals are expected to do the work of three. I am always concerned about burnout because the workload doesn’t seem to abate.” This scenario has played

out similarly in every one of Augusta’s municipal departments.

Bridgeo is excited about the hope for vaccines to stabilize government functions, “If my firefighters and police officers, and public safety people, aren’t coming down sick with COVID, then the services that they perform won’t be interrupted, or delivered at huge extra overtime costs. [Vaccinations will] increase our efficiency as a local government, and our capabilities to do the essential services that we have to do.”

However, vaccines bring a new cost for the city.

Augusta is a designated inoculation site, and has been asked to vaccinate municipal officials for multiple communities. As of now, that cost has not been reimbursed by state or federal governments. Augusta is going ahead with inoculations regardless of the expense, “Our primary concern is to get it done. To the extent we qualify for reimbursement, we are keeping track of the hours and personnel.”

Of more pressing concern is the financial loss expected from the Augusta Civic Center. Bridgeo fears the loss will be a direct impact to the city’s General Fund reserves that could amount to \$2 million. “My hope has been that federal relief packages would include municipally owned conference and convention centers. That would help Bangor, Augusta, and Portland. To date, we haven’t been successful with that.”

BANGOR

As a service center community, Bangor is responsible for providing many services to the region. During the pandemic it has accepted a disproportional lift to support public health and the general assistance applicants. Additionally, the city carries the weight of a regional airport and large event forum, both of which threaten to drain city coffers. “Cross Insurance is hemorrhaging money just sitting there,” and “the airport is backfilled with CARES Act money,” said City Manager Cathy Conlow, “We are concerned, long-term.”

Even with the heavy lift, Bangor endures. Part of the reason Bangor has not fared worse during

the pandemic is the numerous partnerships that Conlow and municipal leaders have nurtured for years. For example, she addressed the pandemic's divisive eviction crisis through statesmanship and partnership with health-care providers, non-profits, and business leaders. "Relationships were in place and we were able to patchwork things together. I think without the experience of working together for eight years on some seriously sticky issues, it probably could have been worse."

Bangor has established partnerships across all sectors and government levels. The city's relationships extend to surrounding municipalities, local hospitals, the U.S. military, welfare providers, and private businesses. Each partnership brings unique benefits and stressors. Some partnerships have recently felt a bit lopsided.



Certain qualities related to Bangor, like its size, geographic location, and transit network, make it a natural outlet for federal and state government to funnel aid through welfare services to a large region surrounding the city. During periods of economic turmoil, this regional responsibility is exacerbated, and Bangor is leaned on more heavily by surrounding municipalities and the state government.

The White House also depends on Bangor to facilitate presidential visits, and did so twice during the pandemic. As a frequent recipient of federal funds, Conlow feels it is Bangor's duty to facilitate such visits, "It takes days of planning, and there is

no warning. It taxes us. We don't get reimbursed for this."

Bangor continues to honor its commitments to established regional, state, and federal partnerships, and is working to strengthen and forge new ones.

BRUNSWICK

To survive the financial strain of the pandemic, local governments had to adapt to ensure the community was protected. No effort demonstrates this adaptation better than the cooperation between local government and private business. The Town of Brunswick has many businesses at risk of losing revenue or closing. To prevent the worst-case scenario, Brunswick is working with local businesses to everyone's benefit.

Town Manager John Eldridge is sympathetic to the struggles of local businesses, "I admire what they have been able to do to continue to stay in business given what has happened." Eldridge worries that restaurants and hospitality businesses have been "hit tremendously. I can't imagine how difficult it has been... There is no doubt they really struggled." With limited capacity to help, Brunswick supports businesses as much as possible.

The city adjusted its ordinances to allow more businesses to operate on sidewalks and in parking lots, expanded the outdoor season by many months, offered loans through its development corporation, waived certain business permit fees, and held property taxes rates almost constant. "We were open to anything that people suggested that would help them survive this. We tried to do what we could. We are just a municipality. We don't have a printing press [for money]" said Eldridge. Brunswick is doing anything it can to protect its businesses, and federal support would be instrumental in helping both the private and public sectors sustain the pandemic.

It was a tough year for businesses. "Unfortunately, some aren't going to come back. It's their life and their life savings. It's heartbreaking to see them struggle," lamented Eldridge. While he is proud of the businesses that were able to adapt, Eldridge

worries for what is still to come, “I can’t imagine what they lived through, months of uncertainty and whether they will ever recover.”

GARDINER

The pandemic reinforced the City of Gardiner’s collaborations with community members and surrounding municipalities. Beyond the incredible effort from municipal employees, Gardiner’s businesses, private service providers, and residents stepped up and helped each other. City Manager Christine Landes proudly remarked on her community’s residents, “You can count on people when you need them. They truly step up. They have good hearts. Gardiner is a close-knit community. We have various opinions, but that doesn’t hurt us here.”

Mayor Patricia Hart had similar sentiments about surrounding communities, “I realized how intertwined we are with other regional municipalities and how important it is to work together. The other municipalities have been a great source of brainstorming.”

“Think about what everyone is going through. The pandemic, the racial tension, the economic crisis and the political crisis. There are so many points of stress and yet we came together.” – *Gardiner City Mayor Patricia Hart*

Mayor Hart was not shy about asking for more support from government partners, “We need the federal government to step up and make good on the things they let slip in the last four years. The State of Maine has not done a good job about investing in infrastructure. We need money for roads.” In particular, Mayor Hart was adamant that more non-property tax based investments in broadband is necessary, “We need money for broadband. We need the state to step up and invest in broadband for everyone. It can’t keep falling on the shoulder of municipalities to solve a public utility deficit.”



Mayor Hart’s request is reasonable, especially because “municipalities carry out all the work of taking care of people. It’s not the state, it’s not the federal government. They have stripped the money away from us over the years. They need to step up and invest in our communities. You can’t keep putting it on the back of homeowners.”

MONMOUTH

Although effects of the pandemic struck hard, communities like Monmouth demonstrated resilience and a willingness to adapt. Reflecting on the events of the past year, Town Manager Linda Cohen contributes part of the municipality’s success during the pandemic to “being able to roll with the punches. Which we’ve had to do.” While many of the punches to the community came from the uncontrollable pandemic, other obstacles were created locally.

There were disagreements and moments of antagonism along the way. “Don’t make assumptions that everybody is on the same page; that goes for any catastrophe or emergency situation. Not everyone agrees,” noted Cohen. During the year, town hall operations transitioned from being fully closed, open by appointment only, and open with limited public capacity. Each transition created a period of temporary confusion and frustration for some residents.

Monmouth also encouraged more people to take advantage of online services, rather than in-per-

son visits. Although these operational changes were for the safety of municipal employees, many community members were reluctant to embrace them all. Cohen remarked, “We tried to get people to do more online services when we were shut down....It would help us from a staff standpoint. People just don’t use the online services like we wished they would.” Despite public reluctance, Monmouth is going ahead with a new website launch and adding property tax payments to its list of online services.

Incongruity forced Monmouth to roll with the punches in other ways too. The experiment with remote public proceedings appeared to be a welcome option for residents, whose engagement in such meetings increased, but the select board opted to discontinue the use of remote meetings as soon as it was safe. The town manager was quick to note the peculiar role reversal, “For years, elected officials wanted to do some sort of remote meeting, and the public didn’t like that idea. Now, the selectmen and the elected officials really don’t like the Zoom meetings so much. The public loves them because they can participate... without even leaving their living room.” The community also deliberated closing their beaches to non-residents and cancelling the annual town fair. Both were approved to the dismay of some Monmouth residents and officials.

After proving Monmouth’s resilience to the pandemic, Cohen is ready to “get back to normal and lighten the mood.”

STANDISH

During the pandemic, heaps of private and public money was available to municipalities through complicated grant applications. For Standish, limited staffing and technical capacity made that money almost impossible to access. According to Town Manager Bill Giroux, “Communities like Standish, and for communities smaller, departments heads write their own grants, which is always a struggle because they have full-time jobs to do. For Portland or Lewiston, to apply for grants is nothing. There are many people on staff that are doing grant applications a good part of their workday.” The discrepancy in grant access during

the pandemic has motivated Giroux to reach into TIF revenue for a new grant writing position, but he will not be able to be to hire until state revenue sharing stabilizes.

Even with a devoted grant writer on staff, Giroux worries Standish’s voice will still be drowned out. While he believes larger municipalities have bigger needs, he does not want the little guy to be forgotten. For instance, Giroux sees a need for regional broadband investment, but worries it will be overlooked now that Portland has reliable access, “When Portland wants to do something, generally we all say, ‘Yeah, you’re Portland, you’re big enough, we’ll help with that.’ But I hope those bigger towns and cities also realize the needs of the tiny towns of the world.”

VINALHAVEN

Few municipalities formed an emergency operations center as successfully as Vinalhaven. Led by a dedicated team, the Vinalhaven Emergency Operations Center (VHEOC) steered the community through a period of uncertainty and urgency. The VHEOC consisted of the Emergency Management Director Marc Candage, Town Manager Andrew Dorr, EMS Director Kerry McKee, Public Health Officer Jen Desmond, Community Outreach and Volunteer Coordinator Gabe McPhail and, support staff Tanya Robinson.

“Very early on we recognized that this would be a lot easier to handle as a team effort instead of just a public health officer, or Andy as town manager, trying to make these decisions on their own. We quickly realized we could be a lot more efficient,” said Emergency Management Director Marc Candage. Candage is a state recognized Level 1 emergency manager and took the lead in organizing the VHEOC.

Throughout the pandemic the VHEOC has been striving to complete the five core tasks of crisis management: sense-making; planning and implementation; meaning-making; accounting; and learning. While no task has been completed, all have been initiated. Of the five tasks, the VHEOC demonstrated complete mastery in sense-making and meaning-making.



“If you have worked in ordinary times to ensure that those relationships and those lines of communication are there, then in a time of emergency, like COVID, you’re going to be in a far better position. The same goes for paying attention to the often neglected world of emergency preparedness. The community that has addressed that prior to [emergencies] will do far better than the community that hasn’t. Money [should be] appropriated for emergency preparedness function in the community... that’s vitally important. We had that in place to a very large degree in Augusta.”

– *Augusta City Manager Bill Bridgeo*

Sense-making entails recognizing signals that a crisis is forming, understanding the implications, identifying stakeholders, and organizing a response network. Meaning-making is the task of explaining a narrative that inspires, educates, and motivates the public to support proposed solu-

tions. While the VHEOC deserves accolades for all of its effort, its success at determining how the pandemic would impact Vinalhaven and then relaying that information to the public was expertly accomplished.

The fifth task – learning – is central to any comprehensive crisis response. Some of the lessons learned were genuinely new knowledge, while others reinforced previously identified goals. In the interview with members of the VHEOC, three lessons were reported:

1. Reliable broadband in the community would improve communication to residents, facilitate new remote work opportunities, and create more equitable learning for students.
2. The affordable housing stock is inadequate for travelling law enforcement, health care providers, and construction workers. The community would benefit from state support to improve distressed housing or create new units.
3. There is interest in creating a community development fund to facilitate direct assistance from the municipality to private businesses. State or federal aid is being sought to initiate such a fund.

THE MOOD TODAY

The municipal officials interviewed have over 200 years of combined experience. They understand the important role local government plays in the community, especially during crisis situations. In addition to the administration of government services, these municipal officials are constantly gauging the pulse and mood of the community. Beyond administrators, they are community members too. When the combined seven hours of interviews are boiled down, two sentiments stand out. Exhaustion, and concern over continued levels of funding from state and federal governments.

Exhausted describes how municipal employees, businesses, and residents feel 10 months into the pandemic. This exact term was used inde-

“We’re hopeful the next six months will go as well as the first six months. When I say ‘well,’ I mean less dire than we thought.” – *Brunswick City Manager John Eldridge*

pendently in all seven interviews. While there was almost unanimous consensus that communities will persevere, the exhaustion caused by the pandemic has come with a price. Municipalities are stretched thin.

Augusta City Manager Bill Bridgeo assessed the strain, “It has been a tough time. This is certainly not unique in our community. Everybody in our state, in one fashion or another, has experienced the challenges and disappointments and problems associated with this pandemic.” Municipal employees are feeling the strain, yet carry on. Gardiner City Manager Christine Landes feels, “We are not down and out, but team members are exhausted, mostly from making sure everyone is kept safe.” Businesses have adapted their models over and over again, but with no guarantee they survive until summer. “As this goes on people are exhausted from pivoting, [businesses] may not make it if this goes on,” worried Bangor City Manager Cathy Conlow.

Worse than the exhaustion communities are feeling, is the lowered expectations they have for the future revenue streams to lift the financial strain. In general, town and city managers are approaching the coming months and years with hesitation. For the most part, Maine’s municipalities weathered the first 10 months of the pandemic with management moves like budget cuts and freezes, grant applications, and conservative fiscal planning. These techniques allowed municipalities to limp out of the fiscal year and into FY 2021, but not without consequences to future planning. Unless the state or federal government backfill revenue losses, municipalities will have to do more in 2021, with less funding than they had in 2020.

Going forward, municipalities will be forced to operate on reduced budgets. This means continued hiring freezes for needed staff, delayed capital improvements that will only pile-up, property tax increases for homeowners, or a complete halt of shovel-ready projects.

City Manager John Eldridge is leading Brunswick into 2021 with stable fiscal health, but only after lowering the budget expectations for state revenue sharing, excise taxes, and federal funding, “This has been less than the end of the world. We adjusted and we are meeting our lower expectations. We don’t get a lot of federal money directly. Would it help us to backfill some of the reductions we had to make? The answer is yes.”

“Like most towns, we’ve evolved.”
– *Standish Town Manager Bill Giroux*

WHAT’S NEXT FOR MUNICIPALITIES

While each municipality highlighted has qualities that make it distinct from the others, they all share many of the same pandemic-era goals. Four issues stand out from the collective interviews: (1) investment in broadband infrastructure; (2) a statewide housing plan; (3) coronavirus relief for government and businesses; and (4) assistance for struggling enterprise funds. These are goals that municipalities have already made progress towards, but would benefit significantly from further state and federal funding support.

“Staff always wanted protective barriers, so COVID really gave us our opportunity. Some good does come of this thing, even if it means coming up with a reason for doing things and being able to make them happen.”
– *Monmouth Town Manager Linda Cohen*

BROADBAND

The pandemic elevated broadband investment to a top priority. Prior to the widespread use of remote learning and teleworking, many areas of Maine were content with mediocre broadband access. Now broadband has become an essential public utility. “The town has been active in wanting to pursue a broadband solution since 2015. Now COVID highlights the discrepancies of broadband. If we are going to do something about it, here is the time. It has been on our radar, now is the time to make it happen,” said Vinalhaven’s Community Outreach Director Gabe McPhail. For public school students, broadband access is a matter of equity. Remote workers will require homes in areas with fiber optic broadband. Residents without reliable internet cannot access online government services.

Maine is among the ten worst states for broadband infrastructure, based off internet coverage, speed, and price. (Source: BroadbandNow)

In Maine, 12% of homes, or 85,000 residences, are without broadband access. In rural areas, 16.2% of homes are without access. (Source: FCC)

Some communities have already invested in broadband infrastructure or are exploring options for further expansion. Mayor Hart of Gardiner is hoping for state and federal investment in her community. Meanwhile, Vinalhaven, which according to ConnectMaine has 428 underserved residences, does not want to wait for state investment and currently is discussing public-private partnerships to enhance broadband on the island. Even communities like Standish, which have relatively reliable access, are supportive of regional, state and federal investment for broadband infrastructure.

HOUSING

The housing stock in many municipalities is unsuitable to meet their communities’ needs. The problem is unique in each community, but the issue is omnipresent in every municipality. In Augusta and Bangor, homelessness and evictions

The average home in Maine is increasingly out of reach for Mainers.

The median home sales price from September 2020 to November 2020 was \$275K, a 22.22% increase from the same period in 2019. The number of units sold also grew by 26.63% during this time. (Source: Maine Association of Realtors)

In contrast, average weekly wages in Maine only grew 10.9% from 2019 Q2 to 2020 Q2. (Source: BLS QCEW)

are exasperated by rising home prices and the limited availability of low-income housing. The problem has reached the point that municipalities are paying thousands of dollars a month to house general assistance recipients in hotels. Officials in Gardiner are concerned about its housing stock too, especially the large portion of aging and distressed homes. In Vinalhaven, the problem is different. However, the need for new or improved housing still exists. For the island community, there is insufficient short-term housing for the numerous traveling law enforcement agents, medical workers, and project engineers and construction workers who have business to conduct on Vinalhaven.

CORONAVIRUS RELIEF FOR LOCAL GOVERNMENTS AND PRIVATE BUSINESSES

The costs of safety and public health during the pandemic have only partially been recouped. While the CARES Act provided aid to municipalities for PPE, protective barriers, and additional cleaning costs, the majority of funding went to EMS departments and did not fully cover the municipal expense. In Standish, only about half of its \$55,000 expense for pandemic related safety measures has been reimbursed.

“Small town managers sit back and either don’t realize they are not accessing the grants, or just shake their head because they do not have enough staff to pull it off.”

– Standish Town Manager Bill Giroux

The situation is slightly better in Gardiner, where about 70% of its PPE costs have been covered by federal or state aid. Regardless of how much coronavirus relief has been provided from the state or federal government, no municipality has fully recouped the unexpected costs of this pandemic.

Also, the extra expense for public safety has not dissipated. In 2021, municipalities will continue to purchase PPE, install Plexiglas barriers, rearrange physical spaces, acquire new technology and software for remote operations, and pay enormous overtime costs. The extra expenses are not limited to local government either. Businesses have been faced with many of the same costs for similar public safety measures. These future expenses, on top of those already incurred, deserve to be acknowledged with broad funding support from federal and state government.

ENTERPRISE FUNDS

Municipalities that manage enterprise funds like event forums, conference centers, airports, ferries, or large parks and recreation programs are worried that further revenue losses will drain General Fund reserves. While the losses can be partially mitigated, certain expenses continually accrue. With little hope for a quick return to normalcy in 2021, many municipalities with large enterprise funds are worried for their long-term fiscal health.

CONTINUED SUPPORT FOR COMMUNITY

The graphic that follows is a word cloud featuring the most commonly used words from the transcripts of the seven interviews. The size of each word indicates the relative frequency of its use compared to others.

It is fitting that community is one of the largest among the many words. Although municipal leaders across the state are exhausted, struggling, and concerned about future budgets, it is the call to protect the health and strength of the community that keeps them going.

However, as was described in the seven case studies, municipal officials cannot do it on their own. The Congressional Delegation’s continued advocacy for federal programs that support businesses, renters, homeowners and the delivery of government services is needed. As is enactment of a federal stimulus package to assist state and local governments in managing the short-term and long-term financial impacts of the pandemic.

Municipal officials thank you for the work you are doing on this front and encourage your continued efforts.





OUR MISSION

The mission of the Maine Municipal Association is to provide professional services to local governments throughout Maine and to advocate for their common interests at the state and national levels.

OUR CORE BELIEFS

We believe in:

- Local government is the keystone of democracy.
- Representative, participatory, local government.
- The accessibility and accountability of municipal government officials.
- A commitment to honesty, civility, integrity and the highest ethical standards among public officials.
- The vital intergovernmental role of municipal governments in providing basic services essential to public safety and the functioning of our economy.
- Respect for the individuality of each local government and the diversity of its citizens.
- The value of collaboration as a means of strengthening cities and towns and providing needed services.

LOCAL GOVERNMENT
begins with **YOU**[®]