



## Athol Town Manager hopes to bring housing projects to fruition

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*Town Manager Shaun Suhoski said redevelopment of the Ellen Bigelow (pictured here) and Riverbend schools is close to coming to fruition. It's among the many development projects the town hopes to make progress on this year. FILE PHOTO*

ATHOL – When asked about his priorities for the year ahead, Town Manager Shaun Suhoski said he's excited for what could happen in Athol in 2024.

“One of my roles, along with the Planning Department,” he continued, “is to try to cultivate projects that are good for community development, economic development, which helps to build stability into the tax base over time.”



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Suhoski ticked off a list of those projects he hopes to see come to fruition this year. The first is the transformation of the downtown municipal parking deck into a 43-unit affordable housing development.

“That’s a \$10 million-plus investment in the heart of the community,” he said. “It will provide housing to a range of incomes, commercial space – modern commercial space – and it will go on the tax rolls. We take a vacant public facility that is deteriorating and is a liability, and we turn that into an asset. I’m hopeful to see the financing for that and the closing documents, once the surveys are all complete; I’m hopeful to see that happen – the start of construction – in 2024.”

Suhoski also looks forward to progress on the approximately \$30 million redevelopment of the former Riverbed and Bigelow schools into more than 50 units of mixed income and senior housing. The town reacquired the title to those former schools, along with several others, in 2016.

“We had a plan as to how we wanted to deal with these various school buildings,” he continued. “The work on Ellen Bigelow/Riverbend is very close to coming to fruition. It has received many of its needed subsidies, historic tax credits are accumulating. We received a \$1 million earmark, thanks to Congressman McGovern, \$400,000 in ARPA funding from the Selectboard and, more recently, over \$500,000 from MassDevelopment. So, when the Department of Housing and Community Development gives the go-ahead and provides the final funding and subsidies that are needed, we can bring that (project) to fruition.”

Between the parking deck project and the transformation of the Bigelow/Riverbend schools, said Suhoski, “We’re looking at just over \$40 million in investment to properties that are currently in the public domain that will go to a tax-paying status, while providing needed housing.”

Suhoski lauded the efforts of the Planning Department for progress on another project – the greening of Lord Pond Plaza.

“We have a 100% design plan completed through the Municipal Vulnerability Program from the state, with a local match,” he said. “We’re now going to see if we can put together funding – it’s about a \$4.5 million improvement. The aesthetics is what everyone sees. I look there and I see kind of a sea of pavement, a run-down plaza that looks like it was constructed in 1960. You could film a scene for ‘The Walking Dead’ there in the parking lot.

“So, the aesthetic is what we see, but part of this MVP program is restoring the brook that runs under there. We’re going to open that up and restore some green space, and trees, and ecology which will actually treat the stormwater runoff, and we’re going to have a better parking area – and we’re going to have a safer parking area by creating a kind of through street. Right now, everyone kind of careens through there helter-skelter and you have to have your head on a swivel if you’re walking.”

Suhoski said work will continue toward design and construction of an access road to a parcel of land adjacent to Dollar Tree and Wendy’s which town officials hope will eventually become home to a hotel/convention center. The property is owned by Athol’s Economic Development and Industrial Corporation. He also pledged to continue efforts to clean up the site of a former toy factory on Canal Street, possibly acquire an adjacent parcel of property, and begin planning for a riverfront park.

“These sorts of things,” said Suhoski, “attract what I call ‘OPM’ – other people’s money – into the region. That’s the way to drive a local economy.”

One issue Suhoski hopes to tackle this year is additional staffing for the Fire Department. Voters in August 2023 defeated a proposed Proposition 2 ½ override to fund the hiring of eight new firefighter/EMTs which, according to Fire Chief Joseph Guarnera, are desperately needed. On Wednesday, members of the newly formed Fire Department Staffing Advisory Committee will meet for the first time in hopes of developing a plan to add new personnel. The meeting will be at 4 p.m. at Athol Town Hall.

“We’re going to work very diligently,” said Suhoski, “to find a way, or to at least have a plan, both internally and to present to voters – we’re going to need taxpayer support, no two ways about it. We need to increase staffing in that fire department.”