

## Economic Challenges

Hardly a week goes by without a question or comment from a taxpayer concerned with escalating property taxes and increased living expenses. In this challenging economic climate, I am aware that many of our residents strain under increasing tax burdens. Some are facing hard choices. Governor Rell has announced that the State is expecting a large increase in requests for assistance, some for the first time ever. Unlike some of our sister towns, Durham's grand list has relatively few commercial and industrial properties. Without the contribution from our existing commercial and industrial tax base, residential taxpayers could see significant and successive tax increases and reduction of services.

As Chief Elected Official of our town, I consider it my primary responsibility to insure that all of our citizens continue to enjoy our high quality of life. There is no greater threat to our quality of life than uncontrolled tax increases, and I take my responsibilities on this issue most seriously. One of the best and most sustaining ways to relieve residential taxpayer burden is to increase, where *possible and appropriate*, the commercial and residential base. Where possible we need to maintain that base in good economic health.

Unfortunately, vacancy rates at some of our commercial and industrial sites are high and some are threatened by foreclosure. There are two significant commercial properties poised for development on Route 17, although both face considerable challenges. The future of one of our most valuable taxpayers, the former Lake Grove School property, is uncertain. I am forming a task force to study the economic development capacity of this valuable resource that will be made up of staff and point people from the Economic Development Commission. The mission of the task force will be to research viable uses of the property while maximizing economic potential. The Task Force shall use vast resources available through the State of Connecticut and will have access to a contract consultant if necessary. The information gathered by the task force will be turned over to the Board of Selectmen and Planning & Zoning for consideration. There will be plenty of opportunity for public input during that time. As many of you know, there cannot be any changes or additions to the Zoning Regulations without public hearings.

Cooperation with and among our economic development and land use boards is a key element in keeping our existing tax base stable, and in our efforts to expand it for the future. However, cooperation does not equal agreement. Not only do we have to be respectful of differing opinions, but we need to foster an environment where differences are celebrated and not vilified. We need to learn how to disagree in a productive way to expand our knowledge base and to ferret out the best solutions to our problems. To this end, I will continue to exercise the judgment entrusted to me to appoint members to boards and commissions who can best meet the challenges we face and who are representative of varying segments of our community. While all potential appointees bring their life experience and personal philosophy to their task, those who demonstrate open-mindedness toward our challenges are our best hope for the future. No disrespect is intended toward those who may be passed over, and the efforts of all are appreciated.

I am grateful for the confidence and support of our citizens, and will continue to work towards a better economic balance for the Durham taxpayers.