

The Future of the Beacon

Is the *Beacon* on the right path to endure?

By Charlie Darling, *Beacon* staff

I doubt that any publisher of a small, rural community newspaper has ever viewed the future of their publication with confident optimism. The need for the paper is there, certainly; the work is important; but in a small community, the base of support is so small!

Gathering, preparing, and publishing local news for a city is one thing – *The Hartford Courant* will be 250 years old soon – but doing the same for a community of a couple thousand souls, as the *Beacon* does, is a much more tenuous undertaking.

Nonetheless, after 100 issues and almost nine years of publishing today's *Beacon* (and, for the past six months, *AndoverBeacon.com*), I'm still confident that Andover can sustain a community publication for as long as it wants one, if...

... *the volunteers are there*. In a big city, you can always count on "someone else" to step up and get the job done. Not so in a small community! If you don't step up and do it, quite possibly no one will

As the publisher of the former *Beacon* noted, lack of volunteers is enough to kill a community publication. The current *Beacon* is very vulnerable in this area, especially when it comes to attracting volunteers who enjoy using their computers to do volunteer work.

... *the financial support is there*. The *Beacon* depends on a broad base of financial support from the community. Currently, only a fraction of Andover families donate to the *Beacon*. We also depend on the business community for significant support in the form of advertising. We could be doing a lot better in that area, too.

For the *Beacon* to continue long-term, we've got to do better in both areas. We *can* do better, but it takes time and effort ... which brings us back to the need for more volunteers.

... *the content is there*. To be honest, I'm a little discouraged that more of the important, interesting, or just "neighborly" stuff that goes on every week in Andover doesn't appear in the *Beacon*. To keep our community publication vital and engaging, families need to step up regularly with news: career advancements, anniversaries, travel adventures, kids' achievements, and more. Organizations need to send in a steady stream of their activities, achievements, plans, goals, and needs. Town committees that

value transparency and want to engage the community need to provide a steady flow of information, updates, topics for discussion, calls for input, and so on. I wish the *Beacon* had a fleet of reporters to run around collecting all this content, but ... well, see "volunteers," above.

Facing the Challenges

Those three challenges are big ones – I fully understand that! But the rewards of meeting those challenges – not just this week and next, but consistently, year after year, weaving these activities into the warp and weft of life in Andover – are huge. And a community publication that endures across the years is just one of those rewards.

So, do I think *The Andover Beacon* has a future? **Absolutely!**

Is the *Beacon* firmly on the path to that future? **Absolutely not!** Here's why:

Volunteers have poured hundreds of hugely-valuable hours into the *Beacon* over the past nine years, but as some volunteers cycle out of the mix, new ones have to step up.

Donors and advertisers have invested hundreds of thousands of dollars in the *Beacon* over the past nine years; as costs rise and the *Beacon* finds more ways to serve the community (i.e. *AndoverBeacon.com*; more pages; more color; more community publishing projects), the community's level of financial support has to keep pace.

Families, organizations, and Town committees have contributed thousands of articles and photos to our community newspaper over the past nine years, but I know for a fact we're only presenting our readers with a thin slice of the Andover pie every month. We *can* do better, and to be a publication that survives for generations, we *have* to do better.

So, will the *Beacon* be here when this fall's crop of kindergarteners graduates high school in '26? When they start raising families of their own in the 2030s? When they start retiring in the 2070s? I say it *can* be, and the past nine years have been a really good start. We may not yet be firmly on the confident, optimistic path to a *Beacon* that survives the generations, but after 100 issues we're certainly within sight of that path.

The good news is that there are ways that *you* can help get us firmly on the right path. I'd love to discuss the possibilities with you. Please call, write, or stop by.



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