

MUNICIPALITY CLOSE-UP: Town of North Stonington



Highway Foreman Stephen Holliday (left) and First Selectman Nick Mullane have dedicated themselves to serving the people of North Stonington for more than a half-century.

North Stonington is among Connecticut's most beautiful towns, with its stunning stone walls, thousands of acres of hilly countryside and open space (including five working dairy farms), and a coveted place on the National Register of Historic Places, with nearly 60 homes and other buildings dating back to the late 18th and early 19th centuries. "The rural nature of the town is what led me to build a home here in 1970," recalls First Selectman Nick Mullane, who has headed up the Board of Selectman for the last 28 years, including a 14-year period when he was working at Electric Boat. "I'm essentially in charge of the general government, with the exception of Planning and Zoning, the Board of Education and the Board of Finance."



Among Mullane's major responsibilities is oversight of North Stonington's Public Works Department, which is headed up on a day-to-day basis by Highway Foreman Stephen Holliday, a 23-year veteran with the town, including 20 years in his current position. "I've been here long enough where nothing surprises me any more," says Holliday with a chuckle. "On a winter day I'm liable to get a call to help rescue a cow stuck in the snow, or a farmer will ask to me to skip some spots when we are painting yellow lines on a road because cows don't like to step over yellow lines – or at least some of them don't."

Of course, Holliday's responsibilities go well beyond helping cows. As highway foreman he is in charge

of North Stonington's network of roads (which includes 5.5 miles of dirt road, a real challenge to maintain, especially in the winter), roadway signs, the sanitary landfill, the town's storm water management system, parks and playing fields, and the clearing of roads during and after storms. "I like to think in my time here that we've improved services a great deal," he says. "My number one thing is safety. I tell my people that whatever we do we have to stay safe and keep the people of North Stonington safe."

Mullane and Holliday – both of whom are longtime CASHO members – emphasize that effectively maintaining North Stonington's road network can be particularly challenging for a number of reasons. First, the town's 64 miles of roads are spread out over 55 square miles of land with significant elevation changes. In addition, snow removal crews often have to traverse miles of state roads just to get to their snow routes. Furthermore, because of the town's irregular topography there are many narrow roads, including a significant number with historic stone walls on private property just beyond the shoulder, often making widening of the road prohibitive. "We also have had a significant number of roads breaking apart because of subterranean moisture and the high water table here," explains Mullane. "That requires Steve and his guys to install a lot of curtain drains to prevent roads from heaving in the winter."

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The Department of Public Works' new 40' by 40' wash station was completed last fall, just in time to handle enhanced maintenance needs brought on by the record-setting winter of 2015.



North Stonington bought its own bucket truck two years ago to facilitate tree trimming and storm cleanup throughout the town. All operators are highly trained and certified, keeping with the department's emphasis on safety in all facets of their work.

FACT

Through attrition, the North Stonington Public Works Department has reduced its workforce from eighteen to fourteen employees. "We have been able to do that because of good people and new equipment that has helped keep us up to snuff," says Highway Foreman Stephen Holliday. "The key is to have the right equipment in the right place at the right time – and good people to run it."



Town of North Stonington Department of Public Works Facts and Figures

www.northstoningtonct.gov

Settled: 1649 (as the Town of Stonington)

Incorporated: 1807

Square Miles: 55

Population: Approx. 5,300

First Selectman: Nicholas H. Mullane, II

Public Works Department: 14 employees (including one part-time)

Highway Foreman: Stephen Holliday

Road Miles Maintained: 64.03 (including 5.5 miles of dirt road)

Rolling Stock and Equipment Maintained: 50-plus units

Catch Basins Maintained: 341

Sidewalks Maintained: 200 feet in Village

Parking Facilities Maintained: 5 lots; 4-5 acres

Plow Routes: 7

Town Grounds Maintained: 27 acres (including 10 acres of parks/
recreation areas)

Cemeteries Maintained: 12-15

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Clearly, Stephen Holliday has a lot on his plate but, according to First Selectman Mullane, Holliday is always up to the task. “Steve picks the work, plans the work, schedules the work and oversees the work, including putting together contracts for outside services. He’s also involved in labor negotiations and personnel matters. In the midst of all those responsibilities he also has to take care of the highway garage, the transfer station and the recreation area, and he is quick to help out the fire company, schools and other departments that service us... Steve never gives himself the credit he deserves. He’s a true department head and he’s very effective in everything he does – and Steve does it all.”

Holliday is quick to deflect his boss’s praise. “I have great guys working for me. During labor negotiations I went to the town and said that whatever you can afford to give these guys I want you to give them. They have effectively handled everything over the last several years – major floods, hurricanes and snowstorm after snowstorm. I feel I have a dozen members of an extended family working with me every day, and this past winter the family got really close because we spent so much time together between January and mid-March.”

Holliday pauses and continues. “The first thing I say every day is ‘Stay safe and let’s get the job done.’ The guys also know that I am always open to their suggestions because I know how knowledgeable and capable they are. I’m very proud of my crew. I’d put them up against any Public Works Department anywhere.”



“I always say that we work for Mother Nature. I might make out a schedule for the next three weeks or month, but what Mother Nature deals us is what we end up doing the next day or that evening. Mother Nature is always at the steering wheel.”

Stephen Holliday, Highway Foreman



On March 30, 2010, North Stonington was hit with 9” of rain – on top of an additional 9” that had fallen just the previous week. Town Public Works crews worked for months restoring the town’s road system. Shown here is a flooded parking area just across from Town Hall.



Approximately ten years ago, solar panels were installed at the Public Works Department’s salt and sand storage building, shown here along with the building’s lean-to and fueling station. According to First Selectman Nick Mullane, the solar retrofit has reduced electricity usage at the building by 75 percent. Solar panels also have been installed at the Town Hall, transfer station, firehouse and senior center.



North Stonington Public Works crews totally rebuilt the west side of this downstream headwall after severe flooding virtually destroyed it in March 2010.

Uncle Jim

Among North Stonington’s Public Works Department employees is 91-year-old Jim Tillinghast – known as Uncle Jim – who has worked for the town for 48 years. “Jim has worn out more tractors and sickle bars than anyone I’ve ever seen,” says Highway Foreman Steve Holliday. “As they say around here...” If it ain’t snowing, Jim’s mowing.”