

The Acton News Initiative, Inc.,

doing business as (d/b/a)



2024 Annual Report

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President's Report

This Founding Year report on the demonstrable growth of the Acton News Initiative, Inc. - d/b/a Acton Exchange ("ANI") encompasses more than 12 months (as we were forming the structures of the organization throughout 2023) and an outsized growth curve for any emerging news nonprofit.

As the sections within (and the browse-worthy links at <https://www.actonexchange.org/about-us/>) illuminate, this Founding Year+ saw ANI transform itself from the hopes and dreams of concerned Actonians into an accredited 501(c)(3) non-profit organization, registered in MA, with a solid record of:

- Publishing a growing volume of creditworthy local news and letters
- Fostering strong community relationships
- Raising startup funds
- Defining and protecting its interests through sound business practices
- Designing for digital accessibility
- Cultivating the journalism skills of a broad and diverse cadre of volunteer writers
- Attracting the attention of Boston University's journalism program, the Institute for Nonprofit News (INN), the [MASC's Daily Ed](#), as well as a growing number of community leaders and residents across Acton.

ANI is now well-positioned for further growth and development in 2025 and well beyond. Some of our new hopes and dreams include:

- Partnering with Acton-Boxborough Regional High School (ABRHS) to develop journalistic opportunities for students
- Hiring a part-time professional to relieve some of the weekly burden on our all-volunteer staff
- Developing solid and sustainable school sports coverage
- Expanding our reach to provide local news to more of Acton's households
- Launching a Sponsorship Program to partner synergistically with local enterprise
- And more!

We hope the readers of this Report will see the talent, skill, dedication, perseverance, and chutzpah of our volunteer teams and find ways within your own capacities to catalyze the ongoing commendable growth of the Acton News Initiative and Acton Exchange.

Submitted by: MaryHelen Gunn, Founding President

The Board of Directors

Board Structure & Terms:

ANI's Current Board of Directors is comprised of six (6) members with staggered terms. Beginning in November 2023, as part of the organizing structure of the entity, each Founding Board member served an Inaugural Term of 1, 2, or 3 years.

After the Inaugural Term expires, the Board member may then be reappointed to serve for one or more regular terms of 3 years. Thus, each November, two (2) members of the Board are up for renewal or rotating off the Board, and 4 members continue until their term expires.

At the November 2024 Annual Meeting, 2024, Founding Member Marion Maxwell's term expired, as did the slot filled by Bob Miller. (Having replaced a Founding Member who resigned.) Both Ms. Maxwell and Mr. Miller were reappointed by the rest of the Board to new three-year terms.

The current Board composition and their associated terms are as follows:

		<u>Term Expires</u>
President & Founding Director	MaryHelen Gunn	2025
Treasurer & Director	Bob Miller*	2027
Clerk & Founding Director	Avantika Nautiyal*	2026
Asst. Clerk, Tech Lead & Founding Director	Jeff Vandegrift*	2026
Founding Director & Editorial Team Liaison	Kim Kastens	2025
Founding Director & Senior Liaison	Marion Maxwell	2027

*Bob Miller Joined the Board as Treasurer upon Pam Minichiello's (Founding Clerk) resignation for personal reasons in June 2024, at which time Avantika Nautiyal took over the Clerk role and Jeff Vandegrift was assigned as Assistant Clerk role as needed for back up on State filings.

Editorial Team Report

The primary responsibility of the Editorial Team is to ensure that every week (except for a few holiday weeks), the Acton Exchange website contains interesting, accurate, appealing, Acton-relevant content. In addition, they recruit new writers, work to improve the journalistic skills of active writers, establish and maintain lines of communication with editors of neighboring publications, write and disseminate the Weekly Newsletters and Quarterly Updates, oversee the Letters Committee and Calendar Team, liaise with the Board of Directors, draft new policies as the need arises, and work with the Tech Team to expand and improve how our online content is made available.

Articles:

The Acton Exchange published our first article via the Action Unlimited on April 30, 2023. Since then, we have published 576 articles, and in recent months we have been publishing between 5 and 13 new articles per week. Across 2024, we refined our article-handling process to handle an increasing volume of submissions. Improvements include a weekly Tuesday evening Editorial Team meeting following the weekly article submission deadline, and a much more methodical system for organizing text and images to pass over into the Wordpress layout process. Notably, Miriam Lezak is now serving as de facto Photo Editor, attending to completeness, resolution, credits, permissions, and alt text (description of photo contents) for the multimedia component of our articles.

Writer recruitment:

We have recruited a broad and talented cadre of writers: more than 80 individuals have published at least one article in the Acton Exchange. Although we welcome a broad range of voices, repeat writers are advantageous in that they need less editing and coaching. To encourage repeat writers, during 2024 we developed "beat reporters" who commit to providing ongoing coverage of a specific aspect of Acton, for example, a specific Board, Committee, Commission, or topic, and also "correspondents" who are active and knowledgeable members of non-governmental community organizations who write about programs and events of their organization.

We now have eight active beat reporters, covering School Committee, Select Board, Acton250, Council on Aging and senior issues, Acton Water District, business news, People in the News, and community events. Six correspondents report occasional news from the Acton Chinese American Civic Society, the Acton Latino Family Network, Friends of Pinehawk, the Acton Conservation Trust, the Acton Garden Club, and Congregation Beth Elohim.

Writer development:

Editor-in-Chief Franny Osman works tirelessly with individual writers to improve each week's stories, coaching them on how to develop the Acton angle, remove opinion or judgmental language, and strive for balance and completeness. In 2024 we began a more methodical program of writer development, beginning with a Saturday workshop on journalism ethics in January.

The Editorial Team also organizes and facilitates the monthly 2nd Wednesday All Hands meeting, generally using the second half of these meetings for writer development. Writer development topics at the All-Hands meetings have included: Covering meetings, Contradictions & conflicts in local journalism, Planning and conducting an Interview, Copy-editing, Photographs & images, Problems & issues with sources, and Determining newsworthiness. Most sessions have used short videos from the [Earn Your Press Pass](#) community journalism training program to catalyze discussion. The first half of each All Hands meeting is called "Let the left hand know what the right hand is doing" and is used for cross-team discussions among editors, writers, the tech team, and Board members.

Direct communications with readers and stakeholders:

By April 2023, the AE team had developed an email list of community stakeholders and begun sending them occasional Updates about the status of their emerging local independent news source, including titles of recent articles. In April 2024, the Update function was split into two threads: Weekly Newsletters and Quarterly Updates.

The Weekly Newsletters are aimed at all readers and include links to all that week's new articles with brief and sometimes humorous descriptions. The Quarterly Updates are aimed at Team members, funders, and other stakeholders, and convey what has been happening with the Acton News Initiative as a business and as an organization, including peeks behind the scenes as in "Meet the Editorial Team." Non-ephemeral content from the Updates is archived and made public on the [History of the Acton Exchange](#) page on the website. Franny Osman is the lead writer for the Weekly Updates and Kim Kastens for the Quarterly Updates; as with all AE writings, there is always a second set of editorial eyes on each Newsletter and Update edition before distribution.

As of late March 2025, we have attracted 1390 subscribers to the Weekly Newsletter and are adding one or two new subscribers most days. Weekly visitorship to the website is running at approximately 2500 unique visitors (devices) per week, indicating that we are attracting a broader readership than just our subscriber base.

Website Redesign:

Although the website redesign was led by the Tech Team as described in that section of this report, the Editorial Team contributed by consulting on all aspects of the design, drafting and posting the initial versions of all the static pages (About Us, Policies, Subscribe, etc.), retrofitting old articles into the new format by adding photographs and hyperlinks, developing subcategories for the News and Arts & Culture categories, and applying subcategory labels to all the existing articles.

Letters:

The website redesign incorporated a place for Letters, a capacity we had not had with the prior blog-style website. Letters to the Exchange opened in early April 2024. Prior to that, the Editorial Team had drafted an initial Letter Policy and recruited (with help from the Board) a three-person Letter Committee. We experienced a flurry of Letters in connection with Town Elections and Town Meeting and subsequently settled down to a steady stream of one to four letters per week.

In total, 96 letters have been published. Nine additional correspondences were considered by the Letter Committee but not published as letters; of these, four were redirected elsewhere in the publication (e.g. Bulletin Board) and five were considered to be letters but unacceptable under the Letters Policy. The Letter Committee is functioning well, communicating with letter writers as needed and reaching decisions effectively. Kim Kastens of the Editorial Team acts as Liaison between Editorial and Letters.

Calendar:

The Editorial Team worked closely with the Tech Team to develop our new calendar feature, which rolled out with the first edition of January 2025. Beginning in July of 2024, in preparation for the Calendar rollout, the Editorial Team had begun to solicit items for a community "Bulletin Board," in order to get a handle on the types of events and announcements that Actonians would want to include in a Calendar. Bulletin Boards were assembled manually by the Editorial Team and published as weekly articles. In addition, the Editorial team drafted a Calendar policy, which was tweaked and approved by the Board, and began the process of recruiting a Calendar Team. Miriam Lezak of the Editorial Team has accepted responsibility as the Calendar Editorial Lead.

Submitted by: Kim Kastens, Editorial Team Member and Board Director

Technology Team Report

As mentioned above in the Editorial Team Report, the Tech Team was focused on website enhancements and improved public communications.

Several changes / upgrades to our web based and communications methods were implemented in 2024, setting the stage for further growth in 2025:

- In January, 2024, we moved our Phase 1, limited release, website from a private server to a commercial web hosting service, Dreamhost. In addition to web hosting, Dreamhost provides additional email capabilities for our internal communications.
- The weekly newsletter and periodic updates were migrated to Mailchimp. This service provides a better subscriber experience, supports consistent public communications, and simplifies subscriber administration.
- The second change, a big one, was the launch of our Phase 2 (and current) website. Acton resident David Gerratt of DG Communications donated the design, which a consultant implemented. The website continues to evolve as we expand content.
- Since publishing the public website in April, we have added and upgraded several security mechanisms to maintain privacy and enhance the reader experience.
- Due to rapid growth in subscribers and readers in general, we found our website had outgrown the platform it was running on, so, working with our hosting service this past August / September, we migrated it to a faster server. This eliminated the slow page loading times many readers had reported to us.

In the Fall we began working on a Calendar Page, targeted for public release in Q1 2025.

In 2025 we look forward to the release of our Calendar, refinements to our Donor Page and the likely addition of Sponsorships. .

Submitted by: Jeff Vandegrift, Tech Team Lead and Board Director

Treasurer's Report

The Acton News Initiative Inc. (ANI) having only incorporated in mid-November of 2023 began 2024 with a cash balance of \$6220.94 due to a very successful Go Fund Me campaign attracting 133 donations in the closing weeks of 2023.

This base of cash, in conjunction with ongoing fund raising throughout 2024, allowed ANI to:

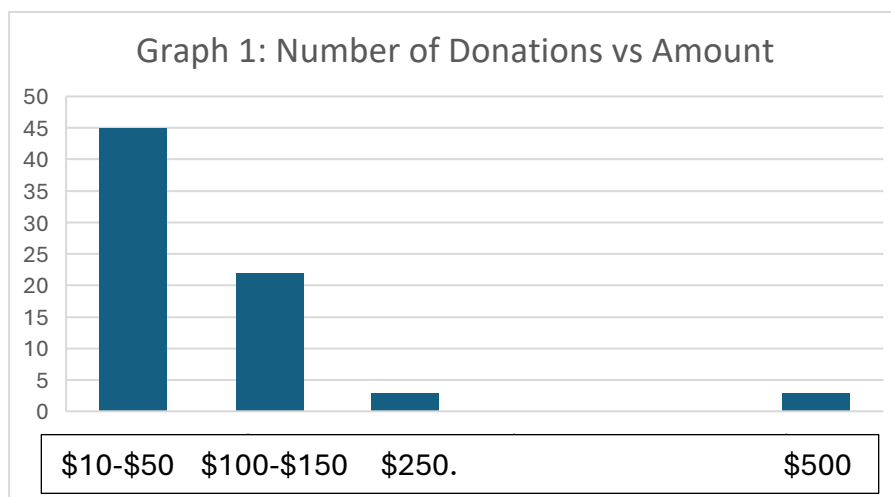
- Create its website where its weekly paper is presented to the public
- Meet all corporate governmental filing requirements
- Successfully apply for 501(c)(3) status establishing ANI as a tax-exempt Public Charity
- Receive its required Certification of Solicitation from the Attorney General of Commonwealth of MA, and
- Purchase the appropriate insurance policies to protect the entity and its volunteers.

Below are ANI's 2024 year-end Financial Statements with a brief discussion of significant items.

Table 1: Statement of Cash Flows		
Acton News Initiative, Inc. d/b/a The Acton Exchange		
YEAR END 2024		
	Current Year	Previous Year
Cash flows from Operating Activities		
Cash & In-Kind equivalents received from contributions	\$6,517.04	\$6,220.91
Short Term Interest	\$0.26	\$0.03
Total Operating Expenses	\$5,619.49	\$0.00
Net cash from operating activities	\$897.81	\$6,220.94
Cash flows from Investing Activities		
Proceeds from maturity of long-term investments		
Purchase of long-term investments		
Purchase of property and equipment		
Net cash from operating activities	\$0.00	\$0.00
Cash flows from Financing Activities		
Collection of contributions restricted for long term purposes	\$0.00	\$0.00
Payment of long-term debt	\$0.00	\$0.00
Net cash from financing activities	\$0.00	\$0.00
Net increase (decrease) in cash and cash equivalents	\$897.81	\$6,220.94
Beginning cash and cash equivalents	\$6,220.94	
Ending cash and cash equivalents	\$7,118.75	\$6,220.94

As indicated on ANI's Statement of Cash Flows (Table 1), ANI received \$6,517.04 in total non-restricted cash and in-kind donations. Cash donations of \$6123.47 came from over 70 individual donations, through mailed checks, PayPal transactions via the website and from Donor Advised Funds (DAFs).

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These individual donations ranged from \$10 to \$500 as shown. (Graph 1).

In-kind donations of \$363.23 were software packages purchased directly by the web-development volunteer team and donated to ANI.

Total Operating Expenses of \$5,691.49 are detailed in the Income Statement (Table 2). Note that expenses are broken into Program Operations, Fundraising and Corporate Overhead.

Program Operation expenses include web page development and WordPress plug-ins for ease of use of the website totaling \$3,081.25. Fundraising expenses of \$275.39 were simply stationery and postage expenses for thank you notes to donors and the fees associated with taking donations via PayPal (essentially credit card transaction fees).

Corporate Overhead of \$2,262 included the firm's Director and Officers Insurance, along with filing fees at with the MA Attorney General and Secretary State offices, the Town of Acton d/b/a filing and most significantly \$600 for the firm's 501(c)(3) filing with the federal government which will not need to be made again in 2025. Also included here is ANI's membership with the Institute for Non-Profit News (INN) a considerable resource for ANI's efforts and of course the cost of the mailbox.

After all operating expenses are accounted for, ANI starts 2025 with \$7,118.75 on hand. Given this base, ANI is well positioned to maintain its current operations in 2025.

However, more importantly given ANI's established 501(c)(3) status as a tax-exempt entity, 2025 presents an opportunity to significantly ramp up development efforts (fundraising).

ANI's goal is to establish both a reserve fund to support ongoing operations as a recommended best practice for non-profits and to raise funds to support the organization's ability to hire part time layout and production support services, relieving some of that labor by the volunteer Tech and Editorial teams.

Table 2: Income Statement	
The Acton Exchange	
YEAR END 2024	
Revenue	
Donations - Unrestricted	\$6,153.81
Donations in Kind	\$363.23
Interest Income	\$0.26
Total Revenue	\$6,517.30
Expenses	
PROGRAM OPERATIONS	
On-line Services	\$1,211.25
Web Site	\$1,870.00
	\$3,081.25
FUNDRAISING	
Office Supplies	\$113.22
PayPal Service Fee	\$100.12
Postage	\$62.05
	\$275.39
CORPORATE OVERHEAD	
Corporate Filings	\$891.85
D & O Insurance	\$933.00
Dues/Memberships	\$150.00
Postal Box Rental	\$288.00
	\$2,262.85
Total Expenses	\$5,619.49
Change in Net Assets	\$897.81
Net Assets 12/31/23	\$6,220.94
Current Net Assets :	\$7,118.75

Submitted by: Bob Miller, Treasurer and Board Director