

2025
ANNUAL REPORT

Table of Contents

Table of Contents	1
Mission Statement	2
President’s Update	2
The Board of Directors	3
Editorial Team Report	4
Overview.....	4
Calendar & Bulletin Board.....	4
Letters.....	5
Articles, Writers & Journalism.....	5
Technology Team Report	8
Treasurer’s Report	9

The Acton News Initiative, Inc.
doing business as (DBA)
The Acton Exchange

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Mission Statement

Our mission is to operate as an independent organization that consistently provides relevant and accurate news to the Acton community. We are committed to reflecting diverse voices and encouraging civic and community engagement as we inform and enrich the lives of our readers.

President's Update

The second year of The Acton Exchange operations, 2025, has been a remarkable journey of growth. Our dedicated, all-volunteer teams have made significant improvements across various aspects. We have witnessed substantial increases in readership and subscriber numbers, and we have expanded our outreach to more residents within the Town of Acton. Additionally, we have implemented several enhancements to the website, making it more user-friendly and faster. Notably, we have initiated a robust fundraising strategy this year.

Acton Exchange writers and editors consistently deliver high-quality news and stories that engage readers. In 2025, we published 439 new articles, averaging 37 per month, while maintaining high journalism standards.

In collaboration, the Editorial Team and Technology Team have added innovative features to the Exchange website. This year, we launched a calendar for events, and formalized our process and policy for publishing obituary notices for individuals with a current or past connection to Acton. Readers have responded positively to these features.

In early 2025, The Exchange welcomed four new volunteers with marketing and communications expertise. The marketing team aimed to expand community reach, enhance readership and subscriptions, and boost visibility in the Acton business scene. By year's end, subscribers increased by 50%.

As our readership and site visits grew, the technology team noticed occasional slowdowns and recommended upgrading the hosting platform. Since the upgrade, performance and stability have greatly improved. The Tech Team also implemented the community calendar, improved donations page, and sponsorship features .

In 2024, the Board of Directors sought to enhance fundraising for financial stability. A team, including board members, marketing and technology staff, devised a strategy for local businesses to sponsor The Exchange on the website. By year-end, 13 of 18 spots were filled.

The second fundraising initiative was the NewsMatch campaign, organized by the [Institute for Nonprofit News](#) (INN). As an INN member, The Exchange submitted an application and was subsequently accepted to participate in the 2025 campaign. Throughout the two-month duration

of the event, The Exchange received donations from local residents, amounting to over \$18,000. When the final results are released in April 2026, The Exchange may be eligible for \$15,000 in a match from INN along with a \$1,000 bonus for gaining over 50 new donors, plus \$2,000 from the Barr Foundation for a total of 18,000 additional dollars.

The Acton Exchange has achieved significant growth in a number of areas in 2025. This is a tribute to all of our volunteers and our teams that work together to provide a news source that is informative and meets the needs of town residents. That momentum will continue in 2026.

Mike Brandt
President, Board of Directors

The Board of Directors

The current Board of Directors is comprised of six (6) members with staggered terms of three (3) years each. Director reappointments and appointment of Board officers are made in the Annual Meeting which occurs in November of each year.

MaryHelen Gunn, the Board's first president and a founding director, resigned her position effective on April 30, 2025. In the Board's April meeting, Mike Brandt was appointed as a board member for the balance of MaryHelen's term, which expired at the November 2025 Annual Meeting. Mike was also appointed by the Board to serve as President, effective May 1, 2025.

At the November 2025 Annual Meeting the terms of Kim Kastens and Mike Brandt expired. Both were reappointed to additional terms expiring in 2028. The Board also approved the following officer appointments for one year: Mike Brandt, President, Bob Miller, Treasurer, and Jeff Vandegrift, Clerk.

Following the Annual Meeting the Board composition and associated terms were as follows:

Name	Position	Term Expires
Mike Brandt	President	2028
Kim Kastens	Director	2028
Marion Maxwell	Director	2027
Bob Miller	Treasurer	2027
Avantika Nautiyal	Director	2026
Jeff Vandegrift	Clerk	2026

Editorial Team Report

Overview

The responsibilities of the Editorial Team remain as they were at the time of the 2024 Annual Report: 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.

Membership of the Editorial Team was stable through 2025: one Editor-in-Chief (Franny Osman), two Associate Editors (Miriam Lezak and Kim Kastens) and one copy editor (Janet Furey). The through-theme of the Editorial Team experience of 2025 was transformation from the Wild West mode of operation during start-up years 2023-2024 into a more stable, sustainable, formalized set of processes, policies, entities, and personnel by the end of 2025.

Calendar & Bulletin Board

After an intensive collaboration between the Tech Team and Editorial Team, we rolled out our new [calendar feature](#) with the first edition of 2025. Built on a WordPress plug-in, the system lets the user select whether to view the calendar as a list, by the week, or by the month. Each calendar event includes date, time, location, a description of the event, and often a link to further information. In 2025, we published more than 550 calendar events.

The intent is that a Calendar Team, comprising Associate Editor Miriam Lezak and another volunteer, shall vet and publish calendar entries coming in from the community. While this structure functioned well for much of 2025, the second volunteer resigned to take up a career opportunity, and that role is currently vacant. The [calendar policy](#), which specifies what kinds of events are accepted and how to submit events, has evolved as experience accumulates.

To spread the workload and increase accuracy of event entries, the Calendar Team recruited trusted calendar contributors, who are active members of organizations in town that sponsor large numbers of events, and trained them in how to enter their own events directly into WordPress. Calendar contributors have low-level WordPress access, allowing them to enter and edit their own material, but not publish; contributed events are vetted and published by the Calendar Team. Organizations that do not have a trained calendar contributor can submit their event information by email to calendar@actonexchange.org.

The calendar format only accommodates events that are tied to a specific date, time and place. To accommodate announcements and opportunities that do not fit into that format, we continued

to refine the Bulletin Board feature, which runs each week in the lower left corner of the front page. The Bulletin Board carries announcements of ongoing opportunities (to volunteer, contribute, learn, participate, apply, connect, etc.), government announcements (from town, school district, and water district), and other announcements that the editors consider to be of broad interest to the community. New in 2025 is a listing of faith-based organizations that serve Acton residents, with web links to each.

Letters

The Acton Exchange began publishing letters in May of 2024, with the advent of the new website. Over the course of 2025, the three-person Letters Committee evolved into a smoothly functioning team, with stable membership (Leo Fochtman, Pat Clifford, Cristina Morales-Alvarez). The Letters Committee functions semi-autonomously from the Editorial Team, making their publish/no-publish decisions independently while attending closely to the [Letters Policy](#), and with Associate Editor Kim Kastens providing coordination with the rest of the editorial and production process. As experience has accumulated, slight clarifications to the Letters Policy were made, as noted at the bottom of the policy page.

The Letters Committee receives letters by email up to the non-negotiable Tuesday 5 p.m. deadline, vets incoming letters for completeness and communicates with letter writers if required information is missing, formats letters, then meets on Thursday evening to decide which letters to publish. Letters are published on Friday or Saturday by a member of the Letters Committee, using a dedicated WordPress login that imprints “by Letters Committee” as the byline. As our online-only publication has no space constraints, all letters that conform with the [Letters Policy](#) (in the judgement of the Letters Committee) are published. In 2025, 75 letters were published; 12 letters were considered but not published, most commonly for lack of Acton-relevancy or failure to provide required writer information (full name, street address, phone number). The letters process could handle more letters than we currently receive, and in 2026 we will be looking for ways to build this feature into a more active and vibrant community “Exchange.”

Articles, Writers & Journalism

In 2025, we published 439 articles, averaging slightly more than 9 articles per week during each of our 47 weeks of publication (we take two weeks off in the summer, one week at Thanksgiving, and two weeks over the winter holidays). An advantage of online publishing is that we can easily shrink or swell the number of articles to match the newsworthiness of the week. Our fewest articles per week was 6, and our maximum was 19, for the May 10, 2025 issue reporting on Annual Town Meeting. Articles have covered the full span of Acton-relevant topics, from government to environment to arts and culture, to sports and everything in between.

We now have 50 writers who have published at least two articles in the Acton Exchange, and more than 120 writers who have published at least one article. In editing, the editors aspire to maintain the diverse voices that make our paper into a true “Exchange” – while editing out opinion and judgement from the news articles. To coordinate among these many writers, and

avoid duplicate submissions on the same event, the Editorial Team communicates with writers via the writers' email list and recently established a Google Sheets-based resource where writers can record what they are working on and see what other writers have in the works. The monthly All-Hands meetings, hosted by the Editorial Team, are another opportunity for the most active writers to brainstorm about story ideas and directions for future coverage.

Acton Exchange story ideas can emerge from established or emerging writers, or be suggested by editors. An unanticipated synergy has developed between the AE Calendar and the story development process: the editors can look out across the next few weeks of calendar entries to see what events would merit coverage in the newspaper and recruit appropriate writers in a timely manner. As the AE has become better known, we have been receiving an increasing inflow of press releases from government, businesses, and non-profits; the editors are learning how to extract or develop interesting, Acton-relevant stories from this influx. A more detailed description of how we handle press releases was provided in the Summer 2025 Update, still available via the [History tab](#) of the About Us menu.

In 2025, we took important steps to regularize and streamline our editorial process. The deadline for routine articles is noon on Tuesday, and the Editorial Team meets at 5 p.m. on Tuesday to assess the status of the in-hand articles, anticipate late-breaking articles (e.g. Select Board and School Committee notes) expected later in the week, identify what needs to happen to complete the week's edition, line up articles for future editions, and generate an Editors' to-do list. All editors participate in editing articles using recommendation mode in Google Docs, with the Editor-in-Chief making final decisions. The hand-over process, by which text, images, and directions about article placement are conveyed from Editorial to Production has been ironed out, and now proceeds smoothly most weeks.

The Acton Exchange is rich in photographs and images. In 2025, Associate Editor Miriam Lezak took on the role of photo wrangler, organizing a methodical system for interacting with image providers, naming image files, storing and filing images, keeping track of credits, captions, and alt-text for each issue in a Google spreadsheet, and organizing the images and associated metadata into a format that is straightforward to access when the issue goes over to the Tech Team for production.

In 2025, we took a few cautious steps into the fast-changing realm of AI-assisted reporting, guided by AE writer Greg Jarboe, who researches and writes about artificial intelligence for his other writing gigs. Our [editorial policy](#) requires human writers, and we do not allow AI-written articles. However, we have found AI to be invaluable in summarizing complex documents or transcripts into succinct summaries that can speed and ease the reporting process. A more detailed description of our experiments with AI was provided in the Fall 2025 Update, accessible via the [History page](#) under the About Us menu.

We had published a couple of [Obituaries](#) in 2024, but in 2025 we made a concerted effort to develop this section of the paper, which is important to many members of the community. The newly developed [Obituary Policy](#) specifies appropriate subjects (current and past residents, and

people with a connection to Acton), fee (zero), and word limit (none). Obituary text and a photo are provided by the family or funeral home. In 2025, we published 11 obituaries, and the pace is picking up in 2026. Obituaries currently run as current news articles, and can all be accessed via the [Obituaries tab](#) on the People menu. Taken as a group, these charming mini-biographies paint a picture of Acton as a community populated by interesting, accomplished, civically engaged human beings.

Submitted by Kim Kastens, Editorial Team Member and Board Director

Technology Team Report

- Starting in January we began work on our Sponsorship program. Acton resident David Gerratt of DG Communications made design updates to the website to accommodate sponsor logos and we launched with six charter member sponsors in September. Our Sponsors grew to twelve by the end of 2025.
- In March we reviewed our technical infrastructure security. While no urgent issues were uncovered, candidate improvements were identified that will support our future growth.
- Mid-2025 our website performance suddenly slowed down. Having known since Acton Exchange launched that we would someday outgrow our (almost free) web hosting service, we upgraded to a Virtual Private Server (VPS). This gave us exclusive use of both CPUs and Server Memory, improving both typical and worst-case page load delays.
- Tech welcomed two new members. Lori Fassman and Jeff Terrace bring additional WordPress and internet skills to the team as well as providing backup for all things technical.
- In November we replaced our donate page with one that supports recurring donations and donor specified amounts. Several donors have opted into recurring donations, which helps us in our financial planning.
- At the end of the year we began exploring available project management tools. Initially these will be utilized for project managing and documenting changes to our public-facing website, and subsequently all our technical tasks.
- Finally, to support all Acton Exchange's teams, we are planning to migrate from Google Groups (older, less supported offering) to Google Workspace. The latter is a more powerful and better-maintained platform for our organization.

We look forward to both the migration to Google Workspace and the adoption of project management tools.

Submitted by Jeff Vandegrift, Tech Team Lead and Board Director

Treasurer's Report

The Acton News Initiative (ANI) has financially benefitted by significant growth in its fundraising capabilities in 2025. Having established its 501(c)(3) nonprofit status in 2024, ANI was able to establish multiple paths of giving and to take advantage of the [Institute for Nonprofit News'](#) (INN) matching program at year end. This, combined with the sponsorship program, greatly enhanced revenues compared with 2024 as shown in The Statement of Cash Flows below.

Statement of Cash Flows The Acton Exchange For the Year Ended December 31, 2025

Cash flows from Operating Activities	Current Year	Previous Year
Cash & In Kind Donations	\$23,962.45	\$6,517.04
Sponsorship Revenue	\$17,325.00	\$0.00
Short Term Interest	\$57.36	\$0.26
Less Change in Accounts Receivable	\$1,384.99	\$0.00
<u>Less Total Operating Expenses</u>	<u>\$9,243.31</u>	<u>\$5,619.49</u>
Net cash from operating activities	\$30,716.51	\$897.81
Net increase (decrease) in cash	\$30,716.51	\$897.81
<u>Beginning cash and cash equivalents</u>	<u>\$7,118.75</u>	<u>\$6,220.94</u>
Ending cash and cash equivalents	\$37,835.26	\$7,118.75

Specific milestones / changes affecting cash flow in 2025 include:

- Achieved almost \$24,000 from over 180 individual donations through the year.
- Established sponsorship revenue of \$17,325.
- Expanded the acceptance of ANI's suitability for gifting among Donor Advised Funds (DAFs).
- Established a mechanism for Stock Donations through [DonateStock.com](#).
- Establishment of our first set of recurring donors which resulted in an accounts receivables category in our accounts.
- Increased operating expenses reflecting both growth in marketing efforts and need for media liability / errors & omission insurance.

A detailed discussion of changes of sources of revenues and expenses is outlined after the following table comparing income and expenses between 2025 and 2024:

Statement of Activities / Income Statement
The Acton Exchange
For the Year Ended December 31, 2025 vs December 31, 2024

	2025	2024
Revenue		
Donations - Unrestricted		
DAF Donations	\$6,700.00	\$1050.00
Donations in Kind	\$16.69	\$363.23
Mailed Donations	\$5,087.25	\$2,279.81
Matching Funds	\$0.00	\$0.00
Stock Donations	\$656.51	\$0.00
PayPal Donations	<u>\$11,502.00</u>	<u>\$2,824.00</u>
	\$23,962.45	\$6,517.04
Sponsorships	\$17,325.00	\$0.00
Interest Income	<u>\$57.36</u>	<u>\$0.26</u>
Total Revenue	\$41,344.81	\$6,517.30
Expenses		
Program Operations		
OnLine Services	\$1,970.54	\$1,211.25
Web Site	<u>\$990.00</u>	<u>\$1,870.00</u>
	\$2,960.54	\$3081.25
Marketing & Fund Raising		
Donate Stock Fee	\$25.60	\$0.00
PayPal Service Fee	\$602.16	\$100.12
Postage	\$185.20	\$62.05
Promotional Materials	<u>\$1,026.69</u>	<u>\$0.00</u>
	\$1,839.65	\$275.39
Corporate Overhead		
Corporate Filings	\$72.00	\$891.85
D & O Insurance	\$933.00	\$933.00
Media Liability Insurance	\$2,696.00	\$0.00
Dues/Memberships	\$150.00	\$150.00
Postal Box Rental	\$288.00	\$288.00
Office Supplies	\$49.69	\$0.00
OFFICE - Other	<u>\$254.43</u>	<u>\$288.00</u>
	\$4,443.12	\$2,262.85
Total Expenses	\$9,243.31	\$5,619.49
Net Income	\$32,101.50	\$897.81

Total revenues of \$41,334 were achieved in 2025 as compared with \$6,517 in 2024. As mentioned in the opening paragraph, donations were up significantly due to both our ability to target a broader subscriber base for donations which was done during the INN Matching Gift campaign along with broadened methods of donation methodologies. These included qualifying ANI with more DAF organizations, providing for the option of stock donations through DonateStock.com and the increased functionality of our Donor page interface with the PayPal platform. A significant contribution to revenues was the new Sponsorship program which offers an opportunity for recurring revenue as we manage this tool going forward.

Total expenses in 2025 were \$9,243 compared with \$5,619 in 2024. Although direct program related expenses were about flat, three items drove the higher expenses for the organization; insurance fees, promotional materials and PayPal service fees.

The Board determined that it would be wise to have Media Liability / Errors & Omission insurance coverage to protect our volunteer efforts. This important coverage was the most significant single expense of the organization. Promotional expenses incurred included flyers and handouts used at various tabling campaigns to increase awareness of our newspaper, which helped significantly grow our readership and supported our efforts to gain local business sponsors. Finally, the natural result of increased donations through PayPal are the increased fees associated with credit card processing through that site.

Only one area showed a lower expense, that being Corporate filings, where we did not need to make a \$600 filing for our now established 501(c)(3) status.

Going forward, the current cash position of ANI, along with the expected matching funds of \$18,000 from the INN campaign, positions the organization to pursue professional support in managing our weekly web content uploading / production process. We anticipate being able to finance this support while maintaining a cash reserve throughout the year to handle any immediate emergency.

Ongoing fund raising from both our subscribers and targeted major donors / foundations will be required to supplement and broaden the reserves as well as to establish enough recurring revenue to allow ANI to fund a part-time managing editor in addition to the web support. The long-term funding to bankroll these positions is viewed by the Board as needed to lessen the weekly burden on our current all-volunteer editorial staff and to establish long-term sustainability of the operation.

Submitted by Bob Miller, Treasurer and Board Director