

Town of *Dunstable* Selectboard
Departments Head Meeting Minutes
August 10, 2016
Town Hall, Dunstable, MA 01827

Convened: 10:00 am

Present: Walter F. Alterisio, Leah D. Basbanes, member(s); Tracey Hutton, Town Administrator; Brian Rich, Fire Chief; Mary-Beth Pallis, Library Director; Carol Skerrett, Town Clerk; Anne Fenochetti, Elder Director; Bonnie Ricardelli, Treasurer/Collector; Alan Chaney, Conservation, Cemetery, Forest; Terry Atwood, Highway, Assessors, Inspections; Vicki Tidman, Assistant Assessor; Cheryl Mann, Conservation, Water, Planning; Mike Martin, Roads Commission; Lorraine Leonard, Town Accountant; Karl Huber, Water Commission

Meeting with Department Heads

The Board started the meeting off by explaining where the town currently stands on the issue of what is going on with personnel, most importantly being the work of the Personnel Board with respect to wages and benefits. The Board noted that some concerns have been raised over the process so far. The Board's prospective in answering these concerns is that if there are issues; they should not be allowed to fester. Therefore, the first order of business for the Board was to arrange a meeting with Department Heads. This was in part to determine what the state of the town is and what the facts are in relation to the Personnel Board's work. From there it may be necessary, the Board noted, to determine that a meeting of all town employees be held. This meeting and that meeting would be held in order to determine what the underlying concerns and problems are so that they may be addressed. There appears to be a fear, the Board noted, that because the new Personnel Policy doesn't explicitly state something employees understood to be a benefit as a benefit, it means that the benefit has been taken away. This is not necessarily the case, and it should not be forgotten that the policy has not yet been finished and remains in a draft form. However, it should not be assumed that the answer will be "yes" for everything; rather it will have to be what makes sense and what is fair and equitable. Over the years Dunstable has done things differently than other towns, and many things were previously done in an informal way. Today things are changing, and the town must do things more in conformance with what other towns are doing. In 2008 DOR and the Commonwealth made recommendations. By 2010 the town began to realize many of them. By 2015 a Personnel By-Law was adopted establishing the Personnel Board and giving it its charge.

From there the Board noted that Dunstable has had an unusually low rate of turnover and therefore has kept employees longer. In addition to this longevity, employees have had a great deal of self-direction with many not seeing supervisors or superiors more than once or twice a month. But things are changing, and a greater deal of focus will need to be had on things moving forward. The town has already accomplished much from the establishment of the Town Administrator position to the adoption of Capital Planning and Personnel Board By-Laws among other reforms and changes. The Board then reminded those in attendances what the Personnel Board has done so far, which was work on the Personnel Policy, the Wage & Classification Chart, and Job Descriptions. The Board noted in particular that the Wage & Classification Chart was heavy lifting by the Personnel Board and started with 20 communities that was whittled down to a handful of communities that are similarly situated to Dunstable. That chart was then was updated from its original FY15 numbers to FY16 numbers in order to be more accurate. Along the way it appears that these changes have created some concerns. There is not unwillingness by the town to pay; rather it is a question of ability to do so. It does not appear that the data suggests that employees are overpaid; rather most may actually be underpaid to some extent. But again, ability cannot be forgotten. Dunstable's budget is about approximately \$10 million. The closest town in situation to Dunstable in regards to population is Essex which has about \$22 million available to it. Harvard, Groton, and other towns have substantially larger populations and consequently, as larger towns, bigger budgets.

The Board then opened the floor to comments and questions. Mr. Huber was the first to address the Board with some concerns about the process so far. He stated that he would like to see a greater level of detail, noting that the Water Secretary puts in a great deal of time and effort and reminded the Board that the Water Department is a recognized public utility. Mr. Huber then expressed confidence in the process stating that he believes the

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town is moving in the right direction. The Board responded with recognition to the fact that many town employees wear multiple hats, i.e. work for more than one department or hold more than one position in the town. Therefore, when the town is compared to other towns, the uniqueness of each position cannot be lost on the town. It was noted by Ms. Mann that this process has kind of opened a Pandora's Box. Further, she asserted, decisions are being made without consultation with employees. This prompted some discussion regarding the existing Personnel Policy and how the process so far has impacted things. The 2010 policy was not widely followed and in some cases, as noted by the Fire Chief, not even provided to all employees. Ms. Tidman noted that she works in the Town of Townsend as well, which also tried to do the process the same way as Dunstable is now and it didn't work. Townsend ended up having to hire a consultant.

The Fire Chief turned discussion back to the uniqueness of the positions. He explained how his position is significantly different than other towns and is in many ways much harder. Mr. Chaney then addressed the Board noting that he has not been asked any questions in regards to the Cemetery even though he manages multiple employees. There has not, in his opinion, been a collaborative approach taken. And he stressed the importance of looking at each individual role. The Town Clerk noted that due to uniqueness it's important that existing employees train their successors, but there's nothing providing for that or incentivizing it. The Board responded that it may be that the next step should be to have employees write up what they do and what benefits they expect so that the town can understand what the lay of the ground is. This prompted responses that some of the descriptions were "cookie cutter" and there was resulting criticism of the process behind them with some contention as to the length of the Job Descriptions. Ms. Hutton reminded the Board that copies of the proposed Job Descriptions were provided to employees prior to the Personnel Board seeing them. From there discussion turned to the differences in some departments such as how Highway employees cannot take vacations during winter and as a result were always historically allowed to carry some vacation time over the July 1st threshold.

There was then some discussion prompted by the Town Clerk, as to the issue of elected officers and how they are handled for raises, primarily the contention as to the Treasurer/Collector being on the chart but the Town Clerk not being on the chart. Ms. Hutton explained that due to the elected nature of the office the Town Clerk, the position cannot be on the chart. As for the Treasurer/Collector one of her positions is appointed and the other will become appointed by May 2017. Because the chart is looking forward, and the Treasurer/Collector will be fully appointed in the future and is in the transition of becoming such, this is why it is included on the chart. Mr. Martin then turned discussion back to the Highway Department and the work of its employees. He stated that the playing field has never been level. Over the years some employees have gotten more and others less. And it was necessary at times to fight with the Advisory Board for as little as 1 percent for Highway employees. Discussion returned to the uniqueness of positions and what benefits have accrued over the years. The Board noted that a great deal of these benefits have not been written or recorded, which is part of the problem. The Board stated that it does not intend to take away benefits, what appears to be happening is that a lack of knowledge is causing the appearance of it.

This developed into discussion regarding the fact that employees have buckled down through years of level funding for budgets despite inflation, and have experienced many years of deferred COLA's. The Fire Chief elaborated on this further reminding the Board that he is a department of one and outlining the difficulties this creates. Discussion then returned to the Personnel Policy as drafted and the 2010 policy. Some discussion revolved around what Ms. Hutton may or may not have told some employees as was heard second and third hand. Some suggested that the Police Chief retired over the issue of vacation leave. Ms. Hutton clarified numerous points regarding the Personnel Policy and stated that the Police Chief did not retire over vacation time and she did not tell him he couldn't use his existing time as he always has. Rather, she informed him about the draft policy and what the likely changes would be going forward. The email that was sent to the Chief is public information and can be produced. The Board agreed, the Police Chief did not retire over vacation leave issues. The Treasurer/Collector then made some comments about how time is accrued and how her office manages payroll. This prompted some discussion as to the process with many commenting that they had understood that what they accrue this year is what is used next year. Ms. Hutton reminded the Board that Town Counsel does not favor this approach and has reservations in regards to it.

The Fire Chief then requested the confirmation that the existing policy remains in place and that his understanding with the town as to things like rolling over vacation remains. The Board responded that what is

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in place now remains; the intention is to clarify the rules and establish a universal policy that is observed. There was then some discussion as to the hiring of the Elder Director which was not posted and advertised. Ms. Hutton responded that Town Counsel's opinion on this was that the town did not have to advertise the position and could hire Ms. Fenochetti without doing so. There was inquiry as to whether the town has a Charter. Ms. Hutton responded that the town does not. There was some ensuing discussion as to whether the town is an equal opportunity employer. It was determined that Town Counsel would be consulted in regards to this question.

There was then some discussion of supervision of day to day tasks, hiring and firing, under the appointing authorities. The Board confirmed that Roads Commission remains over Highway, Water remains over the Water Dept., etc. Ms. Hutton then explained that the Town Administrator only has authority over personnel not under the direct purview of the Board insomuch as the Personnel Administrator position authorizes under the Personnel By-Law and to the extent authorized by the appointing authorities involved which is delegated to the Town Administrator. It was clarified that the Town Administrator is also the Personnel Administrator. Ms. Hutton then elaborated on the process for questions about the Personnel Policy, grievances, and other related matters. It was explained that the authority of the Town Administrator over say the Highway Secretary, would only be in regards to Personnel Administration. Further it was noted that Personnel Board has three by-law created duties, the Job Descriptions, the Personnel Policy, and Wage Classification Chart. The Board then began to wrap up the meeting finishing by noting that a lot of information has been provided and there still remains much information to be determined.

A motion to adjourn was made by Ms. Basbanes at 11:30 am. The motion was seconded by Mr. Alterisio and passed without objection.

Respectfully submitted by



Jakob K. Hamm
Admin. Assistant to the Selectboard & Town Administrator

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