

**Town of *Dunstable* Selectboard**  
**Executive Session Minutes**  
**September 20, 2017**  
**Town Hall, Dunstable, MA 01827**

**Convened:** 7:50 pm

**Present:** Walter F. Alterisio, chair, Leah D. Basbanes, vice chair, Ronald J. Mikol, member; Tracey Hutton, Town Administrator

**Town Administrator Contract Negotiations**

Discussion started with the Board considering some materials concerning the pay and compensation to Town Administrators. There is a lot of uniqueness to be considered. But salary figures and other incentives should be considered. Some of the numbers out there indicate that Ms. Hutton isn't asking for anything far out of line. There are some small towns out in Western Mass that are able to save funds by sharing Town Administrators. But even then, the person in question is commanding a sizeable but reasonable salary. There were reservations with FY18 on pay increases about sustainability. But there may be issues with how the forecasting of funds is, and it may not be that the town doesn't have the funds. The town has to be careful to ensure that it understands its numbers. The Town Administrators job is not an easy one and there is a certain level of chemistry that is more of an art than a science. This requires some strategic discussion and thinking to manage and tackle problems as they arise to keep them under control. The Board is reasonably assured of Ms. Hutton's expertise and skills. The numbers that are out there are mostly provable and what is being asked for is not unrealistic. Incentives are performance driven, and may be a good avenue to pursue. There was a question of when the decision must be made. Ms. Hutton responded that she is getting the department budgets together for an Advisory Meeting in November. So the Board can discuss this at the next meeting on October 3<sup>rd</sup>, 2017. But a number is needed by October at the latest. The Board noted that the Interim Administrator was present to setup the rules, policies, and procedures.

Ms. Hutton interjected that she had to do a great deal of fixing and reworking to fix things. This prompted some criticism of the Interim Administrator. There was a feeling that some things were left worse off. It was clearly not intentional, but there was a lack of skill and understanding. The Interim had been in retirement for a prolonged period of time, and was outdated in many methods. But it was noted that the entire thing was an experiment to try to set up the position and it was a beginning. Nonetheless, the town has learned and clearly Ms. Hutton has learned in the position. Both have grown immensely and there is clearly success. The town has moved up a few rungs professionally and that was one of the goals of the Board from the start. It is necessary to have that professionalism when dealing with an \$11-million-dollar budget. Selectmen will come and go; some will be more professional and experienced than others. This applies to many areas, not just Administration. For example, Roads Commission should be presenting vision and setting policy and day to day management should be done by the Highway Superintendent. Ms. Hutton noted that this is what she is striving for and slowly it is coming to pass. The Board was pleased with that saying elected officials should be monitoring and looking towards vision and policy goals with professionals implementing on day to day basis. But part of that are professionals helping guide the elected officials. This includes the Town Administrator and the Board working in a collaborative fashion. With the relationship flushed out, there was discussion about how to move forward and judge what the best way to determine compensation is. The concern is that the progressions not occur too quickly. Ms. Hutton elaborated on some of the things that she does that is above and beyond what other Town Administrators do, especially in bigger communities. She is a general practitioner where others are not, and those others are often paid substantially more.

The Board agreed, but noted the task is balancing where the town is, what it can afford, and having a competitive pay. Discussion returned to the possibility of incentives. The Board had some conflicting thoughts about the concept. This resulted in discussion of the mechanics and framework. They would tie into the annual performance evaluation and there would be scoring that would be accumulated and then used to determine if the Town Administrator has achieved sufficient enough results to merit the incentives. Ms. Hutton expressed reservations about incentives noting that when the deciders are elected officials, there is the possibility of expectations changing with the political winds. There is no guarantee that when one Board agrees to a set of

*Approved and adopted on 10/18/17*

incentives, a new Board comprised of new members won't change things. The Board expressed sympathy with Ms. Hutton's concerns, but felt that there were ways to address them. The Board felt that the political intrigue is not that great in Dunstable as compared to larger communities like Lowell. Ms. Hutton noted that she's seen it happen in other small towns, and the lack of surety of who will be the next Selectmen. It is her responsibility to herself to secure herself and the concept makes her nervous. There was then ensuing discussion of the evaluation process and how that would work with incentives and whether that's something that can be relied upon at this stage. The Board then asked Ms. Hutton what she is looking for. She responded that she is looking for fairness and figures based upon what was used for every other employee. She wants to be brought up to a competitive salary based on the same data. She asks for approximately \$46 per hour. The yearly salary number starting in FY19 would be about \$97,200. Currently she is at \$77,500. The increase would constitute \$19,000 or about a 25 percent increase. This would be the first third to get her where she should be. Ms. Hutton noted that the Fire Chief saw an increase of \$10,000 per year for 3 years. The Treasurer/Collector per hour makes more than she does, and so does the Town Accountant.

There was then a question as to the percentages. Once at market rates, the increases would be 2 percent a year. Ms. Hutton argues that she is the only employee not brought up to market rate. The Board suggested 15 percent the first year and 10 percent the subsequent year, and 5 percent the year after. Ms. Hutton noted that she would make \$103,000 by the end of this contract, but she would still be making \$40,000 less than her comparable counterparts by 2021. She further noted that she already has a bachelor's degree, two masters, and by the end of this contract period will have a doctorate. Discussion then centered on what the appropriate amount is. It was noted that the Fire Chief's wages are substantially higher now than they were a few years ago. He will make about \$90,000 a year by FY19. And the Police Chief is making more. There was a question about using hourly figures versus salary. Ms. Hutton defending using hourly versus pure salary figures because some of the Town Administrators she's being compared to don't work full time like she does. She further noted what she does, and the experience and skills she has. The Board discussed digesting the numbers further before coming to a final conclusion of what should be offered. The public reaction has to be considered. Ms. Hutton countered that the public reaction was already had over all other employees getting market rates. The number Ms. Hutton wanted would put her at \$97,200 for the first year of her new contract, which would be FY19. She noted that the average for Town Administrators is about \$131,000. She would hope to climb to that market figure by the end of the 3-year period. After a great deal of deliberation, the Board's majority resolved to move forward with a market based figure just as was used for all other town employees. It was then determined that a formal motion could not be done in Executive Session. In light of this the Board determined to move forward with the drafting of a contract that along with the increase an salary both of which would be formally approved in a public session of the Board. The next such scheduled meeting is October 3<sup>rd</sup>, 2017.

A motion to exit Executive Session and adjourn was made by Leah D. Basbanes at 8:55 pm. The motion was seconded by Ronald J. Mikol. The motion was then adopted without objection by Walter F. Alterisio, Leah D. Basbanes, and Ronald J. Mikol.