

**Town of *Dunstable* Selectboard**  
**Meeting Minutes**  
**November 20, 2018**  
**Town Hall, Dunstable, MA 01827**

**Convened:** 4:30 pm

**Present:** Leah D. Basbanes, chair, Ronald J. Mikol, vice chair, James E. Tully, member; Mark Haddad, Interim Town Administrator; James Dow, Chief of Police; Harold Simmons, Kieran Meehan, Advisory Board; Alan Chaney, Conservation Commission; Ryan McLane, School Committee

**Selectboard Reviewed & Signed the Following:**

- Vendor & Payroll Warrants

**Town Administrator Finalist Interview – Robert Markel**

The Board congratulated Mr. Markel on his status as a finalist and then asked a few questions. The most prominent being why Mr. Markel is interested in the position. Mr. Markel gave some background on himself and his interest in the position. The Board then asked Mr. Markel about the significant number of interim positions he's held. He responded by outlining what he's done for the towns he's worked in and noted that the first thing he asks Boards of Selectmen is whether they want a caretaker or someone who is proactive. This then led into discussion of some of the challenges he's tackled and exploration of how he resolved them. Some of the solutions have been easier than others. At times towns have been deeply divided. The town he's faced the biggest challenges, both logistically and emotionally, was the Town of Templeton. Overall in the communities he has served as an interim the biggest challenges have been budgetary and fiscal year end. The Board then shifted discussion to what Mr. Markel has done research wise on Dunstable. Mr. Markel responded by talking about the Master Plan and the budget. Clearly Dunstable needs to find additional revenues and controlling costs. Over and above that other big items include work to be done to roads, affordable housing, and the water infrastructure project. Further the town appears intent on not losing its rural farming heritage. The Board agreed stating that there is a strong desire to keep the town as it is, but that is increasingly hard given the needs of the town. There was then discussion of open space and conservation in relation to those challenges. Mr. Markel noted that the fortunate thing is the town has addressed and updated its Master Plan which demonstrates some early forecasting.

The Board then asked what the best ways Town Administrators can help to solve issues and promote solutions. Mr. Markel elaborated that what he sees most necessary is making departments and employees feel like part of a team. If people are alienated they won't work together and things won't get done. Where there isn't a lot of local media attention, it can also be challenging to get a message out. So one of the things he's done is create methods of communication. This means writing articles that are politically neutral aimed at educating people. These materials can be published in a variety of methods, either through email chains, local publication entities, and the town's website. In his experience people value that. The Board then turned to budget questions asking how Mr. Markel has resolved problems. Mr. Markel elaborated on how some of the towns he's worked for have addressed systematic failures. A lot of times it comes down to people. If a town has good financial officers, it should be able to overcome most challenges. The Board then asked Mr. Markel about his strengths and weaknesses with software and technology. Mr. Markel emphasized his ability to use most software as well as his style regarding email. The Board then asked Mr. Markel about his experience with regional school systems to which he responded by outlining his experience with a variety of schools. One thing he noted was that budget costs are always increasing, and nearly always increasing more than most towns can afford. He felt that the best way to handle that is talking with the school committee and making sure the realities of the town's financial situation are fully understood. That includes asking the school committee in question to be mindful of those limits. The Board agreed that dialogue is important, but noted the challenges. The relationship with the School Committee has not always been easy, but the town has increasingly been trying to improve things. Mr. Markel noted that there is almost always tension given budget realities. But a working relationship has to be found.

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The Board suggested that relationships are important with all boards and committees noting that there are a number of autonomous elected boards in the town and some of the relationships between them have been injured recently. One of the things the Board is looking for is addressing that. Mr. Markel stated that he would work first to meet with Department Heads to get communication working again. It is important to give them as much information on the level as is possible. If you want them to be on the team they need to feel like they are part of one. Then over and above that you work with independent boards and committees much the same. The Board then asked Mr. Markel about his commute, to which he elaborated that he lives in Charlestown, and his experience has been that he is moving away from the flow of traffic so the trip is about an hour. The Board then turned to a question of how much Mr. Markel has moved around. He responded that he has committed completely, but was hired as an interim in those cases. Some towns hired faster than others. He was not terminated or asked to leave so much as when they were able to hire his services were no longer required. Never in his career has he been fired. The Board then asked how many positions he's held that have been full time. Mr. Markel responded that since his retirement, all his positions have been 20 hours a week. The Board was pleased noting that the intent for this position is for it to be 20 hours a week. Mr. Markel felt confident that he could do the job in the time frame, noting that he has been successful doing it. Certainly it means he's busy and there is no time to waste, but it is possible to do. Mr. Haddad then asked a question about what Mr. Markel would do in his first 30 days. Mr. Markel responded that in the first 30 days you form critical relationships with the Board of Selectmen and Department Heads. This means meeting with officials individually as well as holding meetings. You work to develop mutual trust and try to get the right fit.

Obviously boards and committees aren't in the building as much, so he would intend some of their meetings in order to introduce himself and to make it clear that issues and problems are things that can be discussed and are welcome. If problems have been experienced in the past, there will be doubters. So making it clear that he is open, available, and willing to talk is important. In his opinion, it is worth the time to relate well to as many as possible. The Board noted that there are a lot of citizens who serve on multiple boards, committees, and commissions so that may be facilitated or hindered depending on impressions. Mr. Markel then spoke about some experiences he's had with working with reluctant officials noting obstacles that have been overcome and ways to address certain realities. Mr. Haddad then spoke about some of the work he's done for the town, most prominently the budget. One of the first tasks a new Town Administrator will walk into is finishing the budget. He can only stay until December 14<sup>th</sup>. So he asked how Mr. Markel would approach this. Mr. Markel responded by outlining how he's handled budgets and how he's walked into the middle of the process in the past. The Board noted that the town has been working to move its budget process forward into an earlier part of the year given the needs of the school for its budget. Mr. Markel spoke about how he's worked in the past to get detail into budgets and the processes he follows. Obviously the first year will be a challenge, but once that's done it should get easier. The Board then opened the floor to those in attendance. Chief Dow asked whether Mr. Markel felt confident that he can do this work in the 20 hours. Mr. Markel responded that he can. Chief Dow then asked how the 20 hours would be cut up. The Board responded that that is yet to be determined, but would be as part of negotiations. Mr. Markel followed by saying that few Town Administrators work less than the established hours and most work more.

He is prepared to respond and understands that he would need to respond more or less when problems develop on a day to day basis. He can only bill the town for 20 hours, but he doesn't watch the clock otherwise. Chief Dow then noted that one of the things the town doesn't have is an HR Director. He asked what kind of resources Mr. Markel could provide Department Heads like himself. Mr. Markel responded by elaborating on some examples of when he was a Town Manager in Ipswich as well as some of his experience as a Town Administrator in a number of towns. In his time he has encountered a lot of situations from union to non-union. He is familiar with the laws that govern, and has always attended regular meetings of regional associations to keep up with CMR's. So he feels confident that he can help. Mr. Meehan asked about ways to educate boards, committees, and commissions. Volunteers have energy, but don't always know what to do. Mr. Markel responded that certainly the first responsibility is to ensure that people know the applicable laws. Most law firms like the towns, will allow counsel to come in at little to no charge to speak about what the Open Meeting Law and other relevant statutes. Other ways to address that include mission statements and charges, and a few other reasonable methods of equipping people. Mr. Meehan then noted that the town has a number of major projects going on and asked what Mr. Markel feels would prepare him for this. Mr. Markel responded that he is fully versed in procurement as embodied by MGL Chapter 30B, and outlined some projects he's been involved in over the years. As far as design and selection, that is again procurement. The

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Board noted that money is always an issue. The second major issue is always town buy in. Mr. Meehan agreed noting that stating the need and getting people to believe in it is critical. Mr. Markel responded that one technique he's seen work is having events and open houses. If a wall at your Fire Station is falling in, you have an event and invite people to see it. Mr. Meehan asked about social media. Mr. Markel responded that he is not always a fan. He prefers to do newsletters. He finds that if you establish social media accounts, they usually only attract negative input. The Board responded that this can cut both ways; social media can be a blessing and a curse. Mr. Markel agreed it can be beneficial, but noted that sometimes such things only encourage the spread of false information. And responding to that can be a huge challenge without violating Open Meeting Law. The Board then asked the final question, which was why they should hire him. Mr. Markel responded that he has long experience, can bring significant value to the town, and that he can bring a great deal of skills to bear for the town. He is strong in financial management, and that is clearly something that Dunstable needs. Mr. Haddad then stated that the Board has one more interview, than will likely do a background investigation on the selected candidate, and hopefully the new Town Administrator will start by mid-December. Mr. Markel was confident that there would be no issues with any of that.

### **Town Administrator Finalist Interview – Brian Palaia**

The Board congratulated Mr. Palaia on his status as a finalist and then asked a few questions. The most prominent being what it is that made him interested in the position. Mr. Palaia responded by giving an outline of his work history and how that led into his interest and work in government. Surprisingly or not, he started as a landscaper. This in time led to him working in businesses relating to construction and projects for government and eventually working for the State of Connecticut. From there he moved into municipal work in Connecticut, Vermont, and later in Massachusetts. The most recent community he has worked for is Oxford. This led to the elephant in the room, being the media coverage involving his departure from Oxford. He relayed his side of the story, noting that it stemmed from a complaint by a disgruntled employee. Regardless, he remains committed to public work and wishes to continue despite the challenges professionally. The Board noted that his collective time working in municipal government spans 11 years. Mr. Palaia responded that is correct. The Board then asked what he's learned about the town and its challenges. Mr. Palaia responded by outlining the research he's done and noted that he is aware of the town's fiscal challenges as well as significant projects that are coming down the pike noting that the study done on the Rt. 113 corridor was of particular interest. The Board then asked what challenges he felt would be first. Mr. Palaia responded that he has experience dealing with challenged water systems, which is clearly a need. He also has a lot of experience with grant programs and how to figure out what to target, and how to write for various programs. This tied into the water system and his experience fixing a failing system. The Board agreed that the water system is very much a relevant challenge.

The Board then noted that the town has a history of autonomous elected bodies and departments. There are obviously some tensions that arise from time to time, and some communication issues. They asked how comfortable Mr. Palaia is with that and what his methodology would be in helping things function better. Mr. Palaia responded by outlining his history with such challenges in other towns and how he would handle these kinds of issues. To him, establishing strong relationships are crucial. There will likely never be a time when everyone agrees at the same time. But he felt that once good relationships are established between the Town Administrator and disparate entities, solutions can be found. His mission is to help, not to be the smartest in the room or to be everyone's boss. He tries to find solutions and ways of moving forward together. One thing he emphasized is that working jointly with people produces better solutions than anything he can come up with on his own. Trusting Department Heads and experienced officials is key. The Board then asked how he would keep residents and officials informed of issues and needs. Mr. Palaia responded that a variety of tools can be deployed. This includes reports to the Board of Selectmen, reports on the town's website, and articles that can be published in local sources. He noted that he is weary of social media, but said it can be useful. To him the most important part is defining parameters and strategy for effective use. His suggestion is that you only put out information and encourage people to contact the office with any questions. The Board then asked about Mr. Palaia's experience with regional schools, he noted that he is less experienced with regional school districts, but he has had experience with various systems particularly in Vermont where things are done similarly. Still, he felt confident that he could develop a good working relationship with the school district, emphasizing the importance of communication between the town and the school.

The Board then asked about some certifications that Mr. Palaia has asking how many need to be maintained. Mr. Palaia elaborated on what he does to maintain his credentials. Some require frequent re-accreditation, while others require continuing education. He noted further that a few of them are overlapping so what he does to maintain one can apply to others. The Board then asked about Mr. Palaia's strengths with technology and software. Mr. Palaia responded that he has extensive experience with budgeting and with a variety of software's. He is comfortable with budgets, how to use spreadsheets, how to build power point presentations, and is not afraid of technology. He is familiar with GIS, photo shop, and a number of other programs. The Board then again broached the issue in Oxford, asking why Mr. Palaia hasn't been more forceful in responding to the claims and accusations. Mr. Palaia responded that it is much more complicated than he would like it to be. But when you hire an attorney to take the case and you analyze the process, the media is always very careful not to say he did it, but rather to always say he allegedly did it. And when you are a public official you lose the protections you have as a private person to go after people for defamation. In his case they never had a source cited. But as a public official you have to prove actual malice, in other words that they knew what they were publishing was untrue and still published it. He then touched on some relationships between the reporter and a disgruntled employee that he believes is responsible for the accusation in the first place. He also noted some hypocrisy by the reporter that went after him, as she has Twitter posts where she posts pictures of herself at work with a glass of wine on her desk. And yet, she makes the claims against him that she does. All of that said, Mr. Palaia acknowledges from his youth he has had a drinking problem. But he noted that he would never be as successful as he has been if he was ever drinking on the job.

The Board then turned discussion to the nature of the job being part time and whether Mr. Palaia felt he could tackle the issues he would face in that time. Mr. Palaia responded that while his preference would be for full time, he has a colleague who has worked for some years in a similar part time Town Administrator position, and his colleague has loved it. This has given him the belief that this is something that could work for him. If the town is willing to offer him a position he is happy to negotiate. He stated that he won't be nickel and diming the town on those 20 hours. If he makes the commitment, he will do the best work he can. Mr. Haddad then noted he has worked in this role for a few months now, but one of the first challenges is the budget. His ability to work for Dunstable ends on December 14<sup>th</sup>, so the first thing the Town Administrator will face is finishing the FY20 budget. As a result, Mr. Haddad inquired from Mr. Palaia what his plan would be for the first 30 days. Mr. Palaia responded by asking where the budget stands. Mr. Haddad explained that it is in the works now. The town is trying to work on its annual budget earlier in the year than in the past. Mr. Palaia stated that he has walked into the middle of budget season before and would be prepared for it. He then spoke about how he would develop a comprehensive plan that he would bring the Board to develop solutions to some of the pressing problems. Otherwise in the first 30 days he would seek out the most pressing issues and dig into addressing them. He would further seek to have conversations with all Department Heads in order to identify what is pressing now and get a handle on what is coming up. So his main focus would be on hitting the items that need immediate attention. He would also lay out a framework for organization and finding ways to work together with various town bodies. Mr. Haddad noted that one of the things the town is looking to do is get a Governance Committee up and running to look at the town's government structure and make recommendations on changes.

Mr. Palaia agreed as to the necessity of that and noted one of the things he'd do in the first 30 days would be to schedule some Saturday hours to help meet with various town officials. Chief Dow then asked what Mr. Palaia's ability to sell the need for various projects and town needs to the public is and how he would go about doing it. Mr. Palaia responded by outlining the various roles he's played in different towns as to town meetings. He felt confident that he can sell needs. He isn't going to put forward proposals that he doesn't believe in and he will always subject them to hard questions. Anticipating what citizens will ask is critical. Nothing should be put on a town meeting warrant until town officials are comfortable that they can defend them and explain them. Chief Dow then asked what Mr. Palaia's knowledge and strengths in HR are. Mr. Palaia responded he has worked in a lot of towns without HR resources, and he has often been tasked with providing HR from his office. This is not to say he doesn't have anything to learn on the subject. But assured he would work with employees and Department Heads to find solutions. This included an emphasis on being available. Mr. Meehan noted he is relatively new to town, but in his experience, the boards and committees need education. He asked what type of background Mr. Palaia has on this front. Mr. Palaia responded by elaborating on things he's done in the past. One of those was to establish forums annually to talk about goals and objectives as well as to hold meetings to recognize achievements. Getting people together and letting

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people appreciate each other's roles is helpful as this facilitates conversation that establishes relationships. He then spoke about ways to make sure that every committee has a staff person assigned to work with them so that goals and projects have support. This includes things from minutes to other important priorities. Mr. Meehan then asked about social media noting many of the positives he sees in them and asked how comfortable Mr. Palaia is with social media. Mr. Palaia noted that one of the things he's done in Oxford was to contract with a technology platform to help line up municipal social media accounts and ensure uniformity of information that is put out. Some social media entities are better than others, so it is usually good to narrow down to a few. That said he does not believe in debate on those forums. They should only be for putting information out. Mr. Meehan then noted some projects that need to be done from a new public safety building to the schools, asking what Mr. Palaia's expertise is. Mr. Palaia responded that he has been involved in numerous capital projects and public building construction. He noted that if he puts a project forward, he won't do it until he believes in it. The Board asked what the response would be if they override that. He responded that in that case he would do his best to make it work. The Board asked if he would ever make the public know if he disagreed. Mr. Palaia responded he could, but non-controversially, and if asked at town meeting he would give his honest opinion. Mr. Simmons then asked if Mr. Palaia would have to obtain other work and what he would do if he had to put in more hours than the 20 hours. Mr. Palaia responded that he doesn't watch the clock that way and he felt that he would not necessarily need to find other work. Mr. Simmons asked whether anything would interfere with his ability to do his work. Mr. Palaia responded that his wife works full time and he has been reasonably successful in his career and money is not as a big objective in that sense. If he was ever interested in doing anything on the side, he would ask permission from the Board and he would not allow it to interfere with his responsibilities to the town. Mr. Haddad finished by stating the town will do a background investigation on the selected candidate, and hopefully the new Town Administrator will start by mid-December.

### **Candidate Deliberations**

Mr. Haddad started by asking if the Board felt the candidates met the needs of the town. If the Board is not comfortable with them, then the process should be started again. The Board had some concerns about both candidates. The town is coming from a truly damaging situation and there is a need to bring forward leadership, confidence, and strategic thought. Both have their own sets of strengths and weaknesses. But this opinion was not universal. The candidates may be intimidated in ways. One candidate is more on the retirement side the other is young. Mr. Meehan had concerns, noting that the credentials are great, but there needs to be a presence. The Town Administrator is engaging with the public and with various town bodies. One candidate has fewer obligations than the other. If a choice had to be on the spot right now, it might be with the steadier hand. There are a lot of strong wonderful people who work in the town and whoever is hired needs to be capable of handling that. There was then discussion of skeletons in the closet and how those impact things. Mr. Haddad noted that there were bogus false charges against him in his past. Groton took a chance on him, and has never been displeased. Every Town Administrator and Town Manager has something. Just because the prior occupant in the office has had their own doesn't mean that you reject a new candidate because of a smudge. Each candidate was brought forward to address various needs. He has called references for both candidates. This includes colleagues. Both candidates were brought here because it was felt that they could solve the issues the town is facing. It was a strong search committee that brought candidates forward and that shouldn't be discounted. The Board noted that it has been burned, and there is of course reluctance.

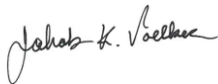
Chief Dow felt that there is a need for the candidate to be capable of navigating personalities and taking command of a room if need be. Mr. McLane presented his reservations with each candidate, noting that one has a controversy that follows them but the town might not get someone as experienced as that candidate otherwise. Someone who has incentive to right their career has a lot driving them to do that. The other candidate is stable and has the credibility to come in and restore faith. Mr. McLane noted that a common problem is baggage, and this is a public position. A lot of people don't like government, so anyone involved is going to have to be prepared for that. He reminded that this is a part time position, for a good amount of money. That said the town is only really going to get the same caliber of candidates. Even if the town went full time at a higher rate, it isn't even guaranteed that the caliber would be any better. The Board conceded that the resumes were good, but it comes down to the interaction with the town and the personalities therein. Both appear strong on budgets and finance, but interactions with the public is crucial. It was one of the biggest issues with the town with the past Town Administrator. Mr. McLane noted as a Town Administrator himself, that the reason he wouldn't personally be interested in the position, if he were available, would be the structure

of the town's government. The Town Administrator as the job exists now wouldn't have a great deal of authority without iron support from the Board. The Board noted that a big part of this is how long the town went without a Town Administrator. What the Board sees as critical is building support. The Town Administrator gains strength through credibility. Mr. McLane responded that every department is fighting for scarce resources, which makes building that kind of credibility from scratch hard. Mr. Haddad interjected to say that he has worked closely with the Board and it is a good board. It clearly wants to make the right choice. With either choice, with the strengths of the Board, success can be found. He expressed great faith in the Department Heads and their ability to work with these candidates.

Mr. Haddad then suggested bringing the candidates back and having them meet with Department Heads. These are the people that need to have faith in the Town Administrator. Mr. Haddad noted that he sat down with each Department Head in the beginning and asked them what was wrong with the relationship with the former Town Administrator. Both candidates would alleviate most if not all of those concerns. Mr. Simmons had reservations, but felt that the quieter candidate was more so based on nervousness than on lack of ability. Mr. Haddad noted that the last Town Administrator was a bully, and the town should avoid hiring that again. Mr. McLane stated that you don't necessarily need someone who stands up at town meeting and tells people how to vote. Rather they need to offer alternatives and work with departments to present unified plans to the public. Eloquence in speech is great, but it's only part of the package. Mr. Voelker agreed generally and indicated that what he heard from the quieter candidate are the right things from a management perspective. Mr. Haddad stated that if the Board wants to do the search again he can help. He is confident that Mr. Voelker can handle the day to day. The Board determined a second interview should be scheduled and the town must consider how to introduce any person hired to the public. A few people were suggested as possible individuals to include in a second finalist interview. Mr. Haddad recommended a series of brief interviews in one day. One room could have Department Heads, the other concerned citizens. The candidates could then go from room to room. Mr. McLane suggested giving the candidates a list of 5 topics that they need to put together for the next six months. Make them give a presentation. It was decided to tentatively pick Wednesday, November 28<sup>th</sup>, 2018 at 3 pm.

A motion to adjourn was made by Mr. Tully at 7:20 pm. The motion was seconded by Mr. Mikol and passed without objection.

Respectfully submitted by



Jakob K. Voelker, Assistant Town Administrator