

Recommended Selectboard's Office Budget Priority for FY23

Increase Selectboard Office Capacity to Enhance Government Performance

A Proposal from the Town Administrator

December 14, 2021

Summary

Goal: To enhance Montague Town Government's ability to work in a strategic and proactive fashion, to better respond to the challenges and seize the opportunities of our current and future context.

Proposal: To increase the capacity of the Selectboard's office to a level more appropriate to the needs of the community through expansion of executive and clerical staffing. Enhancing our ability to plan and execute work efficiently, attract and retain new revenue and investment, better understand and respond to community needs, better support departmental operations, and continue to realize the promise of our community.

Current Capacity

What's Working: Montague benefits from managers and staff who are talented and deeply committed to our community. Many have enjoyed a long tenure with the Town and bring an exceptional level of skill and experience to the job. Our present governmental capacity was developed over time and in response to community needs, with a pragmatic focus on the capacity to execute department-level responsibilities. Department staffing is lean and generally has little or no depth in leadership, which presents challenges in terms of available capacity, as well as succession risk.

The Selectboard's Office is staffed in this same fashion and is responsible for a uniquely broad scope of tasks. These include direct management, oversight, or support for: human resource and personnel management; department head recruitment and hiring; general departmental support, financial management and capital planning, capital project management and implementation, contract and vendor management, facilities and lease management, procurement, grant writing and management, intergovernmental relations, media and community relations, licensing, ADA compliance, information technology, emergency management, and management of special projects and unexpected challenges or initiatives as they may emerge.

The prominent roles of other departments in the above tasks should be noted, as should the limits of their offices' capacity or expertise to attend to them. Nonetheless the Selectboard/Town Administrator's Office must be substantially engaged with and show competency in all of the above areas and more. To do it all well requires considerable and ongoing focus, learning, and work effort. While our team embraces this challenge, we are also aware of the limits of our ability and often find we lack sufficient time to meet the needs of this very broad and constantly evolving agenda.

Present Limitations: As Town Administrator and a Town resident, I am very proud of what this Town has accomplished in recent years, and I am excited by our very promising future. We can continue to achieve progress as presently staffed, but through five years on the job, I've become acutely aware of the limitations of the capacity of this office. The chronic inability to devote what I believe is sufficient time to the planning and execution of work diminishes our effectiveness and limits our ability to respond to community needs, which can result in missed opportunities, delays, and adverse outcomes. **Simply stated, an operation with 75 staff and a \$26M budget requires more than two staff in its executive office.**

Two recent studies focused on assessing and enhancing Montague's human resource and financial management functions served to underscore my understanding of our limitations. In both instances, consultants from the Collins Center for Public Management noted what they consider to be insufficient capacity in the Selectboard Office to meet the demands of those functions, particularly in light of other areas of responsibility born by its staff. That lack of capacity tends to result in a prioritization of immediate workflow/requirements over more systematic planning and management, and can result in the delay of complex projects.

Montague has functioned with this staffing model for years, but the demands of municipal government in 2021 do not favor the approach. As one example, human resources strategy is of critical importance. In addition to compliance and records maintenance demands, a long-anticipated wave of retirements will require a thoughtful succession planning strategy. The hiring, mentoring, professional development and support of new leaders will be a central concern in the next few years. Beyond retirements, our flat organizational structure makes us particularly vulnerable to turnover. We would benefit greatly from better defined and managed systems and processes than we presently possess, as well as the leadership capacity to support staff development, planning, and operations.

As a second example, state and federal government assistance programs have proliferated in recent years, providing communities that have sufficient resources to research, engage program managers, write, and manage project implementation with a substantial advantage in their pursuit of external revenue to supplement the resources provided by the tax levy. This trend has accelerated in the wake of the pandemic and Montague is, frankly, very near its limit relative to grantmaking, project oversight, and administrative management. Expansion of capacity now would be particularly timely and would, again, protect the Town from risk of turnover, which could have a dramatic impact on grantmaking.

Proposal and Budget Recommendation

The FY22 Selectboard budget includes \$170,334 in wages relative to an operating budget of roughly \$13.5M and total Town budget of \$26M. This provides a full time Town Administrator and Executive Assistant; a level of staffing that is not sufficient to support development and maintenance of an effective administrative infrastructure, proactively pursue new opportunities, and to execute required work to high standards.

It is proposed that the Selectboard add new executive and clerical capacity beginning in FY23 and that this should be considered the office's long-term staffing plan. The goal is not for any present member of staff to do less work, but to accomplish more work, more efficiently, consistent with community expectations and municipal government requirements. The proposed positions include an:

- **Assistant Town Administrator for Development, Facilities & Infrastructure (Grade I, 37.5 hrs/wk)**
- **Selectboard Clerk and HR Assistant (Grade B, 20 hr/wk)**

This change would necessitate an increase of roughly \$119,000 (61%) in the Selectboard budget, as well as expected increases in health insurance costs that could range from \$11,904 to \$37,512, depending on whether new hires choose to participate in the Town plan and whether they pursue single or family plans at either of two tiers of cost. Additional pension costs would be in the vicinity of \$10,000/year. There could also be some cost relative to office relocation to accommodate new staff, which is accounted for in the budget figure above.

Costs would be offset to a limited extent by elimination of the MEDIC stipend (\$4,000) and over time by increased external revenue capture, and efficient planning and implementation of capital and other projects. Further, this would facilitate some consolidation of human resource responsibility in the Selectboard Office, shifting some tasks currently located in the Treasurer/Collector's Office, which itself recently reduced its staff capacity, but feels stretched in its ability to perform its HR functions, which may also be considered somewhat of a distraction from the department's core mission.

Role of the Assistant Town Administrator

The Assistant Town Administrator for Development, Facilities, and Infrastructure (ATA) would bear primary responsibility for—and manage or support the implementation of—the Town's community and economic development strategy, infrastructure and facilities-related planning, and related grant-making and management. The ATA would also work on special projects consistent with the above roles at the discretion of the Town Administrator, subject to agreement of the Selectboard. The TA and ATA responsibilities will be well-differentiated, but the positions will be deeply collaborative.

Hierarchically, the ATA position rests under the supervision of the Town Administrator and works at the direction of the Selectboard. The ATA would assume day to day management of Town operations in the absence of the Town Administrator. The ATA would provide supervision to the Town Planner and Building Inspector, and their staff; and would collaborate closely with other department heads, most notably with those managing Town infrastructure or facilities, including the DPW, WPCF, Libraries, and Parks and Recreation, expanding the capacity of those departments to plan and execute work.

Although some responsibilities will require collaboration, the roles are substantially and logically differentiated. A proposed division of work between the Town Administrator and ATA is presented below and would serve as a basis for drafting of job descriptions. The listed responsibilities should not be viewed as exhaustive.

| Town Administrator | Assistant Town Administrator |
|--|-------------------------------------|
| Financial Management and Planning | Community & Economic Development |
| Human Resources/Professional Development | Capital Planning |
| Personnel (Bargaining, Discipline) | Infrastructure Planning |
| Governance and Policy | Facilities Planning and Management |
| Information Technology | ADA Coordinator |
| Supplies and Services Procurement | Construction Procurement |
| Contract and Grant Management | Contract and Grant Management |
| Intergovernmental Relations and Advocacy | Business Marketing and Outreach |
| Board and Committee Development | Board and Committee Support |
| Constituent Engagement and Support | |

A non-exhaustive list of the expected benefits of establishing these positions:

- Greater ability to organize and perform work efficiently, both planned and unexpected tasks
- Better integrated decision making due to increased opportunity for substantive engagement and support of department heads
- Enhanced financial management, human resource, and information technology strategy, management, and execution
- More comprehensive and better coordinated infrastructure and facilities planning & investment
- Better planned and coordinated information technology infrastructure
- Development of better specified and routinized administrative management systems, both procedural and technological
- Improved succession planning and greater resilience in response to Department leader turnover
- Greater support for Departments dealing with financial, management, personnel, procurement, facilities and other challenges
- Enhanced ability influence state policy and practice in consideration of Montague’s needs
- Enhanced ability to engage and support the local business community and market the Town
- Increased emphasis on board recruitment and development, time for long-term governance planning and consideration of bylaw/charter review process
- Staffing approach allows development of complementary skill sets, with ability to shift specific work tasks in response to emergent needs
- Staffing approach avoids the need to create multiple positions focused exclusively on sub-functions, such as economic development, HR, facilities or procurement