

MONTAGUE SELECTBOARD MEETING

1 Avenue A, Turners Falls

Monday, August 11, 2025 at 9:00 AM

Meeting was opened at 9:00 AM. Present were Selectboard members Matt Lord, Rich Kuklewicz, and Marina Goldman; Town Administrator Walter Ramsey; and Assistant Town Administrator Chris Nolan-Zeller.

Selectboard Chair opens the meeting.

Orientation

Ramsey discusses the purpose of this meeting as a strategic planning retreat between the Selectboard and Town Administrator, to review and prioritize policy objectives for the FY26 fiscal year.

Session 1: Review & Assessment of Past Year

Ramsey shares several accomplishments from FY25, including the hiring of several key department heads, adoption of a new wage/class scale, approval of two updated collective bargaining contracts, approval of a payment-in-lieu-of-taxes (PILOT) agreement with FirstLight Power, a new lease for the Colle Building, and an update to the Land Development Agreement for 15 Power Street. Groundwork was also laid for upcoming FY26 priorities including hiring a new Police Chief, rezoning the former Farren Care Center site to support redevelopment, appropriating the funds to support the Sewer Collections Rehabilitation Phase 2, continuing to work with engineers on designing the demolition of the Strathmore complex, receiving a nearly \$500,000 Complete Streets grant for traffic calming and pedestrian safety improvements in Montague Center, acquiring new financial management and payroll software, making progress toward approval of new contracts with the two police unions, negotiating with Shea Theater Arts Center for renewal of their current lease, beginning to negotiate a new energy services contract, working with FRCOG and the Franklin County Chamber of Commerce to hire a shared Downtown District Coordinator, reinvigorating the First Street housing development project with additional cleanup funds from DEP, preparing for upcoming bridge projects on North Leverett Rd, Swamp Rd, and in the Canal District, and supporting MassDOT's proposal for a roundabout at the intersection of Routes 63 and 47.

Emerging priorities include examining health insurance options in light of large cost increases from the Hampshire County Group Insurance Trust, updating the Town's personnel-related policies and bylaws, considering application to the state's Climate Leader Communities designation, renegotiating the Intermunicipal Agreement with Erving for Millers Falls sewer, and revisiting the fee structure for the Transfer Station.

Major upcoming Town votes include the six-town school regionalization initiative, a new or expanded Main Library building, a new Franklin County Regional Technical School building, a school project that would renovate and expand Sheffield Elementary School while closing Hillcrest (contingent on approval by the MA School Building Authority). The School District will be seeking a permanent hire for the Superintendent role in the next year, and this individual will help guide the anticipated project.

Session 2: Assessments of Strengths, Challenges, and Opportunities

Ramsey shares that the Town is in good financial position, has increasing property values, a diverse economy, strong capital assets, and good employee retention. However, threats include rising insurance and personnel costs, an uncertain federal and state funding landscape, redundancy and inefficiency associated with the Town's special purpose utility districts, an unknown future for the regional school district, shrinking volunteerism for Town Meeting and boards/committees, and limited funds to take on the major building projects planned. Major opportunities include new leadership for the Police Department and School District, as well as redevelopment potential of the former Farren site and for the vacant properties in the Canal District.

Session 3: Developing Goals for the Selectboard and Town Administrator

Ramsey discusses long-term replacement of the personnel bylaw with an employee manual, establishment of an online guide for new Town residents, launch of a new Town website in the next few years, a long-term comprehensive update of the General Bylaws, and eventually forming a Charter Commission to evaluate the Town's governing documents.

Ramsey recommended the Board consider adopting a Lodging Tax, as the Town is currently forgoing the collection of approximately \$40-50k each year from about 24 short-term rental properties. He suggested pairing this with adoption of the HERO Act to provide additional tax breaks for local veterans.

Ramsey notes the relatively limited supply of development-ready land available for expanding the tax base, but small opportunities do exist which could be a focus for the Planning Board to consider re-zoning once finished with its current review of the Farren site and bylaws related to Accessory Dwelling Units (ADUs).

Kuklewicz noted the parcel on Millers Falls Rd owned by the Elks Club, as well as the underutilized property owned by Montague Machine.

Ramsey added that the owners of Montague Machine have been working with the Westmass Development Corporation and the Town to consider redevelopment options.

Lord discusses concern for the long-term sustainability of the Town's enterprise funds, with concerns around the Airport's reliance on FAA grants.

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Kuklewicz noted that the Airport had become more sustainable, but could still benefit from additional investments geared toward improving cash flow, including new hangar development and an emergency/contingency fund for operations, and noted that the Commission, not just the Airport Manager, should attend the Selectboard's quarterly airport check-ins.

Goldman asked about opportunities for a more active Airport Commission, and suggested opportunities for the Airport to play a role in the Town's economic development.

Kuklewicz noted that more restaurant development in Town is needed to fill gaps.

Ramsey discusses possible strategic investments in community development opportunities, such as infrastructure to support redevelopment of both the Farren site and Canal District, a multi-use path or bike lane in the Airport Industrial Park, and continued streetscape improvements downtown.

Another major building project anticipated is a composting facility currently being studied and discussed with the company Agresource. The Town would be able to enter an agreement with Agresource as a private vendor to accept waste from the Clean Water Facility and from other communities around the region at a new facility constructed at either Sandy Lane or Industrial Blvd.

Next Steps

Ramsey presented what he viewed as the Top 5 strategic objectives for his office, which are: 1) advancing the Farren and Canal District developments, 2) organizing HR functions, 3) engaging in leadership for regionalization opportunities, 4) supporting the sustainability of the enterprise funds, and 5) aiding the Police Department through its leadership transition.

Goldman asked about the status of Eversource's grid upgrades in the Airport Industrial Park.

Lord asked what authority the Dept. of Public Utilities has in this case.

Ramsey answered that DPU can enforce Eversource's commitments to upgrade the grid in order accommodate the planned solar project.

Kuklewicz added that additional grid capacity was also needed for the new Tech School building, which would be all-electric, also noting that several upgrades were needed when Flower Power constructed their relatively low-electricity facility, and that insufficient grid capacity was inhibiting the growth of current and future industries in the Industrial Park.

Goldman asked how the Selectboard could best support Town Administration.

Ramsey thanked the Board for being accessible and supportive, and for going through proper channels of communication where the Town Administrator serves as an intermediary between the Board and Department Heads.

Goldman noted intention to hold monthly office hours at the Library for residents to visit and voice any questions or concerns they have regarding Town business.

Kuklewicz suggested having a Sewer Commissioners retreat sometime in February in-person at the Clean Water Facility.

Next Meeting:

Selectboard Meeting: August 18, 2025 at 6:30 PM via ZOOM

Kuklewicz makes the motion to adjourn. Seconded by Lord, unanimously approved. Kuklewicz - Aye, Lord - Aye, Goldman - Aye