

Ira Brezinsky, Chair  
Andrea Miles, Vice-Chair  
Jeff Cyr, Clerk  
Sarah Etelman  
Bruce Forcier

Michael J. Sullivan  
Town Administrator

November 21, 2018

Honorable Selectboard,

This report will briefly capture some of the issues and projects which have been occupying my time, as well as others in town hall, over the last two weeks.

It is always a very busy time and often affected by inclement weather. The approach will be similar to last year when I decide to close town hall out of public safety concerns. The conventional wisdom is when the weather is extreme it is unwise to act as a draw for residents to come to town hall unnecessarily. I can assure you and the citizens of South Hadley emergency services continue to operate during these periods.

**“Equity in the Workplace:”** Assistant Town Administrator Jennifer Wolowicz and I recently attended a MIIA training in Chelmsford. The subject matter as focused on laws related to “equity” in the workplace. This change became law on July 1, 2018 and states;

*“No employer shall discriminate in any way on the basis of gender in the payment of wages, or pay any person in its employ a salary or wage rate less than the rates paid to its employees of a different gender for comparable work.”....among other things.*

It goes without saying this law is still being interpreted, but there is sufficient case law and rulings to start in on guidelines and protections. The challenges are many, but I am confident the HR Department will take important steps to ensure the Town of South Hadley is compliant.

The first step will be to do a self-evaluation of job descriptions, titles and compensation. Make internal and external comparisons. To identify areas where there are “dissimilarities” in the requirements or conditions related to the job, such as what are the certifications or degree requirements, is there variation in working conditions, does someone work inside and someone else with a seemingly similar position works outside in the weather. It is worth noting that if a discrepancy exists based on performance based evaluation(s), it can be allowed as a reasonable variance for compensation.

The training also spoke to how the law changed in respect to making “accommodations” for employees who have injuries, disabilities or employees who are

pregnant or nursing. While “pregnancy” is not an area which is presently center stage on our workplace radar, it is helpful to be aware of the requirements.

It continues to be any accommodation must be reasonable and does not necessarily affect the general requirement of an employee having to be able to perform the core duties of their position. As with all changes, as I said previously, it is an evolutionary process, change a law, digest the ramification, sprinkle in some law suits and wait patiently for the work place culture to catch up with the intent. We do our best to keep up with the changes and work to protect the town and its employees at all times.

**Board of Assessors Meeting:** On Nov. 19 I had the pleasure of attending the Board of Assessor’s (BOA) meeting. The meeting was both informative and incredibly well organized and well run.

The reason I asked to attend was in order to discuss the changes related to the Acts of 2018 Chapter 218 - in particular the portion changing the veteran abatement calculation requesting to tie it to the Consumer Price Index. The BOA authorized the Assistant Assessor Melissa Rimbold (nee Couture and great employee) to examine the Town of South Hadley presently-allowed abatements and to consider what the changes in the act, if accepted, would mean to South Hadley.

As part of the discussion it was pointed out that 65% of all abatements presently go to veterans and that there were other programs funded by the town to assist veterans in paying other housing bills. The BOA, while not objecting to discussing the idea, did want to take a longer look.

Chair Kevin Taugher suggested Missy Rimbold and I work to create a presentation which would help taxpayers understand how abatements affect the total equalized value of the municipality. Basically, while an abatement lowers an individual tax bill, it shifts that cost to all other tax payers. I am sure there is more to come on this issue. The BOA chair suggested a meeting or presentation with the SB in late January or early February to discuss the ramifications of any changes. I believe that is something the SB would support.

Some of the good news in regard to the discussion was that values are up 3.3% in town. While the real estate market has cooled slightly in the last month due to rising interest rates, it is a positive sign. Hopefully there will be some “new growth” in the second half of FY 2019, as some of the Gaylord Street industrial properties come out of the cloud of bankruptcy and the Woodlawn Plaza is closer to final plans.

**SHELD/MHC Cord Ribbon Cutting:** On an overcast wintery day, MHC invited town officials to a cord - or ribbon cutting depending on your perspective - on the half meg installation at Kendal Hall on the MHC campus.

MHC President Sonya Stephens, State Representative-elect Dan Carey, SB Chair Ira Brezinsky, and SHELD Manager Sean Fitzgerald, all heaped praise



on the collaborative effort which resulted in bring this project to completion.

MHC has set aggressive goals to become 100 % "green" over the next two decades and to continue to work with SHELD and the Town of South Hadley in reducing our carbon footprint. Congratulations MHC!

**PVPC Eric Weiss:** I had the opportunity to meet with the new Municipal Service Coordinator for the Pioneer Valley Planning Commission. The focus of the conversation was mainly on how we could create more regional opportunities.

In my opinion it is simple: make it easier and seize on opportunities. You make it easier similar to what we have done with providing building commissioner services to Granby. You do not try and hit it out of the park - just get a single.

Taking over the entire responsibilities of a building commissioner for Granby would have tipped the boat in South Hadley and put a river of doubt between all parties. Instead we clearly assessed how much capacity was within the South Hadley Inspectional Services Department (Building Department), how much we could afford to redeploy in Granby, decide whether that was enough to cover their needs, and lastly make the agreement easy to get into and easy to get out of for both parties.

It is now in the second year. Everyone seems happy. It gives Granby what it is required to have and it allows South Hadley to be economically competitive for a well-trained building commissioner and hopefully adds to our retention effort for qualified staff.

Selling some capacity to other communities for qualified staff is a different way to look at "regionalization." When well planned, it can expedite the process and assist

communities on both sides of the changing world of municipal services. I believe in the future, South Hadley can become a leader in selling services to other communities based on capacity and competency. I am not sure where Eric will go, but I would be interested in bring other opportunities to the SB for the benefit of South Hadley.

**PVTA Meeting:** At the most recent PVTA Board Meeting they fished Mike Sullivan's name card of a box of long-forgotten board members. South Hadley's representative Marilyn Ishler was not able to attend, so I did my best to stand in.

One of the agenda items which caught my eye was a program East Longmeadow, Northampton and Agawam have adopted. It is an initially-grant-funded program to increase access to seniors and persons of different abilities to transportation.

The basics as I understand them is each community has agreed to hire part-time or full time drivers to operate smaller (non-CDL) buses in each community (similar to our COA van). The municipality would be taking responsibility for drivers, insurance and gas costs and the PVTA would take care of providing the vehicle and repairs. It is a program in the early stages, but I have it on my list of things to learn more about and see if it would be a viable way to increase transit access in South Hadley.

**HCHIT:** I attended the Nov. 20 meeting of the Executive Committee. The issue of design plan change was part of the subject matter. As more communities have revisited the issue 32B section 21-22 to ensure it is accepted properly, there has been more comments from unions - some of those comments very uninformed from my perspective.

It is a fact the HCHIT reserve fund has trended better in the last year of claims. It would be irresponsible not to look at the financials from the previous three years or longer. It also would suggest blind disregard for the conversation going on nationally.

It is important to consider some of these analytics: in-patient admission is up 7.8% from the previous year, but more alarming in costs for such patients has increased by 14.8% on average. The most costly medical care, Emergency Department use, is up 12.2% or 1,697 more than in FY 17. 1.8% of those covered account for \$18.5 million or 35.5% of everything paid to providers. There was \$52.1 million paid in claims by HCHIT in FY 18.

The story remains the same. The growth in costs is unsustainable for HCHIT without incredibly high premiums or reasonable design plan changes or a balance of both. I will do my best to continue to make decision which are fair to the taxpayer and the employees to preserve this important benefit.

**Holiday Schedule:** I have made an administrative decision to close town hall on Dec. 24 and 31, as many employees will be otherwise unavailable. I hope to avoid both having

citizens come to town hall only to find it closed and avoid the cost of bringing the building up to 69 degrees for eight hours.

I am aware that some object to these closings, but considering how the dates fall and after long consideration, I believe it is the right thing to do. Essential personnel are not affected and I leave the decision to close the senior center and the library to Leslie and Joe respectfully. I have confidence they will make a wise decision on their customer needs.

We will get the message out starting Dec. 17 on FaceBook, the website and through email blasts. If there is inclement weather, we will still be ready to message remotely for parking bans or other notifications.

**Website Update:** There has been much progress made by IT Coordinator James Doolittle, Executive Assistant to Administration Kristin Maher and the CivicPlus design team. Unfortunately, it is largely behind the scenes so the progress is sometimes unnoticed. The color palettes have been updated and improvements are being constructed. Work continues on pages in various ways. We hope there will be something to look at for review in by February of March, with the final product live by May 1. Thank you for your patience on this project.



*"We can't say 'new and improved' until we come up with a product."* 

Please enjoy your Thanksgiving Holiday. I will be return to work on Tuesday, Nov. 27 and see you at the SB meeting that evening. While that evening's meeting will be relatively light lifting, the meetings to follow throughout the next month-and-a-half will be heavy (i.e. budget, license renewals, Town Counsel) duty. Let me know if there are questions or information leading into those meetings on the items I mentioned or others.

Respectfully submitted

Michael J. Sullivan  
Town Administrator, South Hadley