

Town of Topsfield, Massachusetts

Town Administrator

Profile



EDWARD J. COLLINS JR. CENTER FOR PUBLIC MANAGEMENT
JOHN W. McCORMACK GRADUATE SCHOOL OF
GLOBAL AND POLICY STUDIES
UNIVERSITY OF MASSACHUSETTS BOSTON

Introduction

The Town of Topsfield has retained the services of the Edward J. Collins Jr. Center for Public Management at the University of Massachusetts to assist in the Town's recruitment of a new Town Administrator. The Profile draws upon our discussions with Selectmen, department heads, elected officials, staff and residents. It describes our understanding of the Town, the challenges that lie ahead for the successful candidate, and the professional and personal characteristics an ideal candidate will possess. For more information about the Town of Topsfield, please consult Topsfield's website (www.topsfield-ma.gov)

The Town of Topsfield

Topsfield is a residential community about 20 miles north of Boston that has long been considered one of the premier towns in the northern suburbs. The Town is characterized by a stunning pastoral landscape, a history of high service expectations, and excellent schools. The Town has a commercial tax base that is modest; as a consequence, most of the property tax burden is carried by residential property.

Topsfield takes great pride in its commitment to quality education. The Topsfield K-6 school district and the regional 7-12 middle/high school district are well regarded.

Aesthetic values are important in Topsfield, as demonstrated by the significant portion of the Town's land area that is protected from development and the careful preservation of historic structures and agricultural land uses.

Organizational Design and Governance

The current governance structure follows the New England town model established by the British early in the colonial period. The governance structure consists of a five-member Board of Selectmen elected for three-year staggered terms and an Open Town Meeting as legislative body. The following multiple-member bodies are elected: Planning Board, Board of Water Commissioners, Board of Road Commissioners, Assessors, Masconomet Regional and Elementary School Committees, Park and Cemetery Commission, and Library Board of Trustees. Among administrative staff only the Town Clerk is elected.

The Town Administrator position will be vacant as a result of a retirement. The Town Administrator position was established in 2007 by a Town Meeting vote. The by-law creating the position is available on the town's web site.

The volunteer tradition is alive and well in Topsfield, which has a long history of citizens serving in elected and appointed positions. However, with changing demographics it is becoming more difficult to obtain well-qualified volunteers to fill elected and appointed positions.

In contemplating the recruitment of a new Town Administrator, the Board of Selectmen established a new job description one that strengthens the role of the Town Administrator. In essence, the Town Administrator has

charge of day-to-day operation of functions under the Board of Selectmen and also has responsibility for two key functions on a town-wide basis: procurement and personnel (including labor relations). In addition, the Town Administrator has an affirmative responsibility to make recommendations on the budgets of all town departments and has delegated authority to sign warrants authorizing payments. The recently approved job description is available on the Collins Center web site.

Public Finance

Topsfield had total General Fund revenues for FY2012 of approximately \$23 million. \$19 million (83%) of this amount was from Property Taxes. State aid was approximately \$1.7 million in FY2012. In FY2012, the school budget was 53% of the General Fund budget. The Town has a single property tax rate applicable to all classes of property. Over 90% of the assessed value of property is residential. Since 1999 the Town has voted ten operating overrides, most recently in 2011 (for FY2012). The Town's bond rating is Aa2. Detailed financial information for the Town may be obtained at the web site of the Massachusetts Department of Revenue, Department of Local Services.

Challenges for the Town Administrator

- **Establishing the full confidence of the Town's leaders and residents in the Office of the Town Administrator.** While much of the power of the position is a consequence of delegation by the Board of Selectmen, the Town Administrator will gain much of his/her influence through superior knowledge, ability to work with people and communication skills. The first Town Administrator has established positive expectations for the position. The new Town Administrator will have to build on this foundation.
- **Fostering incremental steps toward modernization.** Much discussion and debate has occurred within the Town about consolidation of functions and reducing the number of elected boards that oversee administrative functions. However, the Town has not embraced moves in this direction. The new Town Administrator must work to support the existing system and concurrently foster an understanding, where warranted, of the potential benefits of a more consolidated approach to managing the Town's affairs.
- **Managing the Town's Administrative functions.** The small scale of the Town government means that the Town Administrator needs to have the technical skills to perform and/or closely manage all of the critical administrative functions. The Town Administrator cannot simply *manage* by delegation; he/she must have the ability to perform these functions in a hands on manner. Improving processes and increasing the utilization of Information Technology are expected to contribute to efficiency and effectiveness.
- **Infrastructure Repair and Maintenance.** Topsfield has a significant amount of deferred maintenance and

deferred capital projects. A comprehensive report on these needs has been prepared. A task for the Town Administrator will be to develop a plan to incrementally address these needs.

- **Maintaining a Positive Labor Relations and Management Climate.** The labor relations climate has been generally positive, although there are a large number of bargaining units for a town of Topsfield's size. Lead responsibility in collective bargaining is the responsibility of the Town Administrator.
- **Sustaining a High Level of Public Services.** High service levels have been sustained by residents' ability and willingness to pay for current service levels, but that willingness to pay appears to be eroding in the current economic climate. Since the potential for new growth and state aid are limited, town expenses must be managed carefully. The Town has been managed conservatively and presently has adequate fund balances.
- **Economic Development.** Topsfield is a nearly fully built-out town. Identification and consideration of the few development opportunities that may mitigate the dependence on residential property in collaboration with the Town's land use regulatory bodies will be an on-going task.
- **Communication.** Well-developed communication skills in Topsfield are essential. Open, accurate and timely communication by the Town Administrator with all Town government entities, the public, the many volunteers and employees needs to be strengthened and integrated into the normal operational practices of the Town. The Town Administrator must be able to engage the members of the Board of Selectmen and elected Boards in an on-going dialogue about the critical issues that face the Town.
- **Human Resources.** The Town Administrator is the Town's personnel officer. Building on the initial progress in developing a centralized HR function will be a goal of the new Town Administrator, especially in light of the expanded HR responsibilities in the recently adopted Town Administrator job description.
- **Medium Term Budget Planning.** Like all Massachusetts municipalities, Topsfield is facing revenue constraints and growing cost pressures. A significant amount of the Town Administrator's time will be required to forge town-wide strategies to keep these in balance over a three to five year time horizon.
- **Managing in a small town context.** Topsfield, like many small towns, has a work force that either resides in the Town or has close ties to the Town and can be influential. The Town also has many residents whose families have lived in Topsfield for a long time and are deeply rooted in the community. The Town Administrator must have the skills to function effectively in a small town environment.
- **Developing and Sustaining Institutional Capacity, Staff Development Plans and Morale.** The Town has a well-regarded cadre of department heads and key staff. Maintaining staff morale, fully utilizing

the considerable talents of staff and maintaining high performance standards will be critical to the success of the new Town Administrator. The Town Administrator cannot be desk bound. She/he needs to be comfortable working outside, as well as inside the Town Hall environment. The Town Administrator must foster a culture of continuous operational and institutional improvement; simply presiding over the status quo is not acceptable in the current environment.

- **Regionalization of Services.** Significant opportunities for small towns like Topsfield exist to realize financial and operational benefits by partnering with neighboring/similar communities to provide critical services. The Town Administrator must facilitate and support regional solutions when that is in the Town's interest and should spearhead the study and implementation of regional initiatives.

The Ideal Candidate

The Topsfield Board of Selectmen seeks a Town Administrator who has the demonstrated capacity to lead a town with a long tradition of high-level services. The next Town Administrator will have been seasoned in an environment of similar scale and complexity.

A working knowledge of municipal law and practice especially in the Massachusetts context is preferred. Experience in labor relations, municipal finance, and budgeting as well as in fashioning agreements with other governments is essential, as is experience in community planning and procurement.

Topsfield seeks a Town Administrator with the skill, energy, creativity and experience to achieve Topsfield's goals, including preserving public service levels, balancing selective development decisions with residents' concerns about growth, and maintaining the Town's positive civic attitude toward the future.

Topsfield seeks a Town Administrator willing to commit to a tenure long enough to build a multi-year approach to ensuring the sustainability of the Town's service levels.

The following attributes have been deemed important in Topsfield's next Town Administrator.

Personal

The next Town Administrator needs to be:

- Able to demonstrate unquestioned integrity.
- Able to communicate effectively with all elements of the community.
- Able and willing to play a highly visible role in the community. The ideal candidate must participate broadly across the leadership structure of the community and region and be a champion of the community.
- Comfortable engaging directly with citizens. The Town Administrator must have sufficient direct engagement with the civic community so that he/she can gain a thorough understanding of the Town's culture. Through formal and informal interaction the Town Administrator's concern for the Town's residents needs to become evident.

- Able and willing to work openly with community groups and employees. A direct, collegial, facilitative style that fosters joint problem solving is needed.
- Able to be a vocal and positive spokesperson for the Town's agenda at Town Meetings, at public forums, at state agencies and with the media. The successful candidate must be able to use the status inherent in the Town Administrator's position to advance the Town's agenda.
- Able to assume a strong organizational management role. The successful candidate must be direct, assertive, facilitative, and clear.
- Able to create and sustain a goal-oriented environment by establishing, maintaining and promoting effective policies and initiatives. The Town Administrator must be a genuinely inclusive leader who is capable of exerting influence and direction in a manner that shares successes with elected officials, professionals and volunteers.

Professional

The Town Administrator should:

- Be a mature leader of a comparable organization with extensive personal experience in finance, capital and operational planning, expenditure management, human resources and labor relations, public facilitation, and staff development.
- Be a professionally stable person with a record of tenure and consistent career growth. The Town seeks a committed management professional willing to stay for a significant period, but who is also willing to take risks to improve the organization.
- Be able to demonstrate a background in guiding the development of a shared strategic vision for the community. The ideal candidate must be a coalition builder, equally at home with private sector and community leaders.
- Possess a Bachelor's Degree and preferably a Master's Degree and at least seven to ten years of experience as a town or city Manager/Administrator, Assistant Town Administrator/Manager or other position that oversees the day-to-day operations of a public entity governed by an elected policy body that makes decisions in public.
- Be able to set the stage for continuing the Town's capital plan, utilizing the decline in debt service for existing projects when it occurs, and federal and state resources whenever possible. Pursuing the Town's capital plan while maintaining the Town's bond rating is the goal.
- Be experienced in working effectively in a political environment providing impartial guidance to elected officials to identify and address the long-term strategic needs of the community and the short-term tactical steps necessary to deliver services.
- Be capable of keeping elected officials comprehensively informed, while staying detached from the political process and ensuring that staff maintains a similar detachment.

- Be comfortable managing in an environment where many employees are members of a collective bargaining unit.
- Be familiar with highly participative local government environments with dynamics similar to Topsfield's and with the Massachusetts municipal context, particularly Town government.
- Be comfortable working in an environment often characterized by vigorous debate among well-informed citizens who are active in local decision-making processes. While key decisions made by the Board of Selectmen and Town Meeting may be closely decided, the Town Administrator must effectively represent and implement decisions in a professional manner.
- A person committed to the standards and ethics for municipal management professionals specified by the International City Management Association. (http://icma.org/en/icma/ethics/code_of_ethics)

The Hiring Process

The Town will utilize a Screening Committee to conduct preliminary interviews. The Screening Committee is expected to review the applications of candidates recommended by the Collins Center in May and complete preliminary interviews in June. Interviews of finalists by the Board and a decision are expected in early summer. A mid fall start for the new Manager is contemplated.

Salary and Schedule

The search begins in April 2013 and is expected to end by July 2013. Applications should be received by May 20th, 2013. Anticipated starting salary in the mid-nineties to approximately one hundred and twenty thousand dollars, DOQ. The Town is willing to negotiate a competitive compensation package and an employment contract DOQ with the selected candidate. The Collins Center will recommend at least three fully vetted finalists for interview by the Board of Selectmen.

How to Apply

Applications are preferred electronically. Please send your resume with a cover letter addressing the job requirements to this email address: recruitment.umb@gmail.com. The words **Topsfield Town Administrator** must appear in the subject line. Please combine all of your documents in a single file. Kindly use PDF format, if possible.

Should you have any questions regarding this opportunity, or a recommendation of a colleague, please contact: Dick Kobayashi, Senior Associate 617-489-8812, or Mary Flanders Aicardi, Associate 508-215-8992.

To learn more about the Edward J. Collins Jr. Center for Public Management at UMASS Boston, please visit: www.collinscenter.umb.edu