

11-1-2011

# Report Relative to the Organization and Operations of the Town of Sherborn, Massachusetts

Edward J. Collins, Jr. Center for Public Management, University of Massachusetts Boston

Follow this and additional works at: [http://scholarworks.umb.edu/cpm\\_pubs](http://scholarworks.umb.edu/cpm_pubs)



Part of the [Public Administration Commons](#)

---

## Recommended Citation

Edward J. Collins, Jr. Center for Public Management, University of Massachusetts Boston, "Report Relative to the Organization and Operations of the Town of Sherborn, Massachusetts" (2011). *Edward J. Collins Center for Public Management Publications*. Paper 8. [http://scholarworks.umb.edu/cpm\\_pubs/8](http://scholarworks.umb.edu/cpm_pubs/8)

This Research Report is brought to you for free and open access by the Edward J. Collins, Jr. Center for Public Management at ScholarWorks at UMass Boston. It has been accepted for inclusion in Edward J. Collins Center for Public Management Publications by an authorized administrator of ScholarWorks at UMass Boston. For more information, please contact [library.uasc@umb.edu](mailto:library.uasc@umb.edu).

**THE EDWARD J. COLLINS, JR.  
CENTER FOR PUBLIC MANAGEMENT**

**MCCORMACK GRADUATE  
SCHOOL OF POLICY STUDIES**

University of Massachusetts Boston  
100 Morrissey Boulevard  
Boston, MA 02125-3393  
P: 617.287.4824  
[www.collinscenter.umb.edu](http://www.collinscenter.umb.edu)

# **Report Relative to the Organization and Operations of the Town of Sherborn, Massachusetts**

**EDWARD J. COLLINS, JR. CENTER FOR PUBLIC MANAGEMENT**

**November 2011**



## **BACKGROUND**

The Town of Sherborn has many important assets. The Town has skilled department heads and staff, a committed core of citizens and elected officials, one of the best school systems in the state, a stunning pastoral landscape, and a reputation as an extremely desirable place to live.

Despite these assets, no one will be shocked by our observation that the Town is also facing some very serious challenges. While the immediate prompt for this study and report was the vacancy in the Town Administrator's position, it quickly became clear that the vacancy in the position is not the only challenge facing the community.

In the scope of our study, we were tasked with providing *"an overview of the current organizational structure and operational practice of the Town with a view to identifying changes that might improve the efficiency and effectiveness of the Town."*

We have completed this overview. Before we get into the recommendations, it is important to share our findings about the current structure and operations, so the Board of Selectmen and the residents of the Town have a better understanding of the current conditions.

Furthermore, before presenting our findings, we want to provide the principles that guide our work.

1. **Understand That Every Situation Is Unique.** The Center does not believe there is a single solution that will work in every municipality. Every municipality is unique, and cookie-cutter solutions do not serve the best interests of communities. For that reason, the Center examines every municipality on its own terms and formulates recommendations that will make the most sense for it.
2. **Obtain Diverse Points Of View On An Issue.** The Center recognizes that there are multiple perspectives to every issue, and that the same facts can lead different people to different conclusions. In order to have the best possible understanding of the topic, the Center makes significant efforts to obtain all points of view. Recommendations may not provide solutions acceptable to all, but the Center listens to all sides and takes steps to understand all reasonable viewpoints.
3. **Refrain From Passing Judgments On Past Occurrences.** Understanding the full context of a project requires understanding the history that led to the request for assistance. That often means being aware of past problems and issues, which in turn frequently means hearing reports of conflict. The Center believes it is inappropriate and unproductive to pass judgment on who bears responsibility for past problems.
4. **Make Recommendations That Are Pragmatic.** Although the Center always strives to provide recommendations for the best policy alternatives available, the Center recognizes that all policy is made in a real-world political, fiscal, and cultural context. For that reason, the Center attempts to ensure that its policy recommendations can be implemented and are not simply exercises in proposing unachievable ideals.
5. **Make Recommendations That Are Adaptable.** The Center believes that the world of municipal governance is changing rapidly, due to a variety of fiscal, technological, regulatory, and other factors. For that reason, the Center attempts to provide recommendations that are flexible enough to be successful not only for the present environment, but also for whatever major changes might appear in the near future.

## **FINDINGS**

We have broken our findings down into ten categories. Obviously, these are overlapping subject areas that cannot be disentangled completely, but at the same time we need to separate them to address them in a clear manner.

### **1. Communications:**

Communications channels within the government of the Town of Sherborn appear to be broken and to have been broken for quite some time. Although some staff are quite happy with the communication that is occurring, we were provided numerous direct and indirect examples of problems that arise due to failures of communication. These examples ranged from minor, day-to-day issues (e.g., failures to coordinate the usage of meeting space) to larger, big-pictures issues (e.g., department heads not getting adequate reports about their annual expenditures to date or finding out about key budget changes to a relevant line in one's budget after the fact). Some of these examples involved very specific communications channels (e.g., department heads finding it difficult to get sufficient time on the Board of Selectmen's agenda), while other examples were more diffuse (e.g., a general feeling that information from various boards or committees does not get distributed far or fast enough).

The problem of insufficient or ineffective internal communications is not unique to Sherborn. It is an issue we see repeated in town after town across the Commonwealth. Part of the problem is a direct result of the way that town governments are structured in Massachusetts. (We will return to this topic later.) Some aspects derive from the intersection of the particular legal and technological circumstances of this moment in time. Still another piece comes from the increased workload and decreased hours facing staff and volunteers as a result of the current fiscal circumstances. (More on this later too.) While there are surely Sherborn-specific causes that have added to these general issues, obviously including the current vacancy in the Town Administrator's office, we believe that addressing the general communications problems directly and indirectly will go a long way toward solving many of the Town's challenges.

### **2. Finances:**

We know that the Town has retained the Department of Revenue (DOR) to provide a Financial Management Review of the Town in early 2012, so we will not concentrate on this topic. However, we do think that there are some broad observations that are important.

Among the positive observations we can make, the Town currently has strong bond ratings (AA1 from Moody's and AAA from S&P as of 2010), the most recent management letter from the Town's auditing firm identified only four areas for improvement, debt service payments are manageable, and the Town has an active and engaged Advisory Committee and Capital Budget Committee. All of these will be critical assets in trying to do deal with the financial challenges facing the Town.

In terms of challenges, we note that approximately 86% of the Town's revenue comes from property taxes that, except for new development, can only increase by 2.5% per year without an override. The remainder of Sherborn's revenues (e.g., state aid, excise taxes, etc.) are also generally flat. Against those revenue estimates, some of Sherborn's expenditures increase most years by substantially more than 2.5%. This can include benefit costs like health insurance and pensions (which are about 8% of the budget, not including schools employees), and it includes departmental expenditures such as the schools (which comprises about 64% of the budget). To respond to this imbalance between revenues and expenditures, the Town has been spending down its free cash. This course is unsustainable. Whether the funds last only for this year or for another five

years or more, free cash will eventually be depleted. At the same time, each year fewer and fewer dollars will be available to go into direct services, as more and more go to indirect costs like health insurance and pensions.

This fiscal situation has roots on both the revenue side and the expenditure side. On the revenue side, there does not seem to be any short-term solution to the Town's heavy reliance on property taxes. Changing the revenue picture is at best a long-term prospect.

We have been told that residential parcels have been purchased by the Town and/or converted to open space uses over the years, further reducing the number of parcels across which the residential taxes are spread. Once parcels are removed from the tax rolls, some have to be maintained by the Town (although some of the maintenance is currently being handled by volunteers and non-profits). We were also informed that the current level of residential property tax rates is causing significant problems for some seniors who may be asset-rich but cash-poor. Many who have lived in Sherborn for years or decades are feeling a major financial strain.

Beyond residential property taxes, it is our understanding that there have been efforts to explore increased commercial development, but that these projects generally face two challenges: (1) A lack of critical physical infrastructure like public sewerage, and (2) Zoning bylaws written to reflect and preserve the rural nature of the community. Moreover, it seems fair to say that the Town is deeply divided over the issue of development.

One final revenue source that was raised in the process of our research was grants. It was suggested to us that the Town could be doing more to get grants. We cannot verify whether this is true or not, but it was raised as an important potential skill for future Town Administrators. We do note that there are few individual grants that would have a material effect on operating revenues.

We will address the issue of expenditures in the next section on Operations.

### **3. Operations:**

Before getting into this area, we want to make a comment about the general workload of municipal departments. It is our general observation that the number of responsibilities facing most municipal departments have been steadily rising over the years. At the same time, there have been numerous cutbacks to staff and hours. The need to do more with less leads to frustration, which itself causes problems that take up more time, and so forth. We think staff is to be generally commended for the amount of work it does, and we note that many staff and department heads commented that their fellow employees went above and beyond the call of duty to get work done.

However, while the increased workload and decreased working hours are understandably frustrating for staff, they cannot be an excuse. The work must get done. Toward that end, we identify several processes that are inefficient. Fixing them could free up some staff time and reduce other problems, which could free up even more time.

First, we believe the payroll process is inefficient. Currently, department heads complete a spreadsheet form, print it out, sign it, and have it hand-delivered to Town Hall, at which point the information is re-entered. This process unnecessarily duplicates the data entry work, taking extra time and increasing the number of opportunities for error.

Second, purchasing is decentralized, with each department buying its own office supplies, small equipment, etc. This is inefficient for several reasons: It requires multiple staff (who may not be experts in purchasing) to take time to make purchases; it fails to capture economies of scale in purchasing consumables; it hinders potential sharing; and it prevents central monitoring for waste. (All this is compounded by not using a purchase order system to coordinate and track purchases.)

Third, procurement and contract oversight are not well-managed. Department heads often prepare bids and requests for proposals themselves or seek assistance from volunteers, when the assistance of a trained procurement professional could make the process easier and potentially achieve better outcomes. Similarly, we were told that contract management can at times be lax, leading to department heads taking time to handle problems that could have been prevented.

Fourth, the lack of alignment of office hours between departments in Town Hall may be leading to lost staff time. When residents come into Town Hall to take care of something and find out that one department they need is open while another is not, that is likely to lead to the open department having to spend time responding to resident frustrations. And even if the time saved by fixing this problem were minimal, it is a major issue from the perspective of providing quality services.

Fifth, we were informed that various documents and records have been piling up around Town Hall. While we do not know enough about which documents are piling up and whether that is simply due to state-mandated disposition schedules, we infer that time is being lost searching for documents. Better organization of records could both free up space and save time.

Sixth, a lack of facilities management could lead over time to increased costs as preventive maintenance opportunities are missed, leading to major issues later on. Along those same lines, outdated computers, printers, and other technology may be increasing inefficiency, both due to the time taken to fix them and due to the efficiency gains that newer models might provide. The Town should be careful not to slip into the habit of being penny wise and pound foolish.

Fixing each of these issues would increase the efficiency of Town operations and save critical resources.

#### **4. Human Resources:**

We note that some staff reported a lack of clarity and understanding about what the Personnel Board's role and responsibilities are, and how its role and responsibilities might interact with the Board of Selectmen, the Town Administrator, and others.

In following up on this question, we reviewed the Town's Personnel Bylaw (Chapter 20, pp. 23-6). In particular, we refer to the text of Section 4: Duties of the Personnel Board:

- a) The Board shall maintain a relevant Personnel Administration Plan that is compliant with state law including operating within the meaning of Section 108A and 108C of Chapter 41 of the General Laws, as amended.*
- b) The Board may choose to revise the Personnel Administration Plan, as necessary. Any revisions require Town approval, at the next scheduled Town meeting, and must be compliant with state law as mentioned in Section 4.a of this by-law.*
- c) The Board shall provide advice to the Town, as requested, regarding any matters relating to the application of the Personnel Administration Plan.*

*d) The Board, as part of the application of the Personnel Administration Plan, shall make a cost-of-living (COLA) recommendation to the Advisory Board for each fiscal year no later than November 1 prior to such fiscal year.*

*e) The Board shall establish its own rules of procedure and shall keep a record of its official actions, which shall be kept open for public inspection to the extent provided by law, and subject to appropriation, therefore, may make such expenditures, as may be necessary, for the performance of its duties.*

*f) For the purposes of interpreting the Personnel Administration Plan; complying with state law; and seeking a professional opinion; the Board may seek advice from Town Counsel, as necessary.*

Sub-sections (a) and (b) refer to the development of personnel policies; sub-section (d) focuses on annual cost-of-living adjustments; sub-section (e) deals with the Board's own internal procedures; and sub-section (f) gives the Board the ability to seek advice from Town Counsel. The confusion seems to hinge on sub-section (c), which allows the Board to provide "advice" to the Town "as requested" on "any matters relating to the application of the Personnel Administration Plan." Does this mean that the Board has a role in hiring? Can the Board weigh in if not requested? Does the Board have any decision-making power, beyond the Personnel Plan itself? What is the Board's role in collective bargaining? It is possible that Town Meeting or the Board has clarified these questions outside the scope of the bylaws, but we are unsure about this, and we hypothesize that this may contribute to the confusion about the Board's role and responsibilities.

## **5. Civic engagement:**

We did a cursory calculation on voter turnout in local elections over the last decade, and it appears that it averaged roughly 42%. We know from research the Center is conducting state-wide that this is relatively high, so the Town should take pride in this portion of its civic engagement.

However, there is another aspect of civic engagement where the Town is weak: fielding candidates for office. Over the last ten years of elections in Sherborn, the Town had elections for approximately 190 positions (either as individual officers like the Moderator or Tax Collector, or for members of elected boards or committees like the Board of Assessors or Planning Board). Of those positions, only 11 were contested. (We should note that we were missing data on about seven more.) That means that over the last decade 94% of elections in the Town were uncontested. (See Chart on next page.)

Moreover, many of these positions or boards went the entire decade without a single contested election. This includes the Tax Collector (three elections; data for one election was missing), Town Treasurer (three elections; data for one election was missing), Town Clerk (four elections), Board of Assessors (10 elections), Sherborn School Committee (sixteen elections; one election was missing), Sawin Academy Trustees (10 elections), Library Trustees (30 elections), Water Commission (10 elections), Cemetery Commission (10 elections), Recreation Commission (10 elections), and Constables (nine elections).

Beyond those, the Moderator had only one contested election in ten elections, and the Planning Board, Board of Health, and Dover-Sherborn Regional School District all had two contested elections each in ten years. The Board of Selectmen was the only board or position with more contested elections than that. Four of the last ten elections were contested.

We raise this issue both because we feel it is something that residents of the Town may not be aware of, and because it has implications for management (which we will touch on later).

### Sherborn Elections Competitiveness Analysis

Year	Moderator			Board of Selectmen			Tax Collector			Town Treasurer					
	Candidates	Positions	Comp?	Candidates	Positions	Comp?	Candidates	Positions	Comp?	Candidates	Positions	Comp?			
2001	1	1	No	1	1	No	1	1	No	1	1	No			
2002	1	1	No	1	1	No	0	0	n/a	0	0	n/a			
2003	1	1	No	2	1	Yes	0	0	n/a	0	0	n/a			
2004	1	1	No	1	1	No	1	1	No	1	1	No			
2005	1	1	No	1*	1	No	0	0	n/a	0	0	n/a			
2006	2	1	Yes	1	1	No	0	0	n/a	0	0	n/a			
2007	1*	1	No	2	1	Yes	???	???	???	???	???	???			
2008	1	1	No	1*	1	No	0	0	n/a	0	0	n/a			
2009	1	1	No	1	1	No	0	0	n/a	0	0	n/a			
2010	1	1	No	2	1	Yes	1	1	No	1	1	No			
2011	1	1	No	2	1	Yes	0	0	n/a	0	0	n/a			
<b># of competitive races:</b>			<b>1</b>	<b>of competitive races:</b>			<b>4</b>	<b>of competitive races:</b>			<b>0</b>	<b>of competitive races:</b>			<b>0</b>

\* These positions had candidates on the ballot who received a minimal amount of votes relative to the winner.

Year	Town Clerk			Board of Assessors			Sherborn School Committee			Trustees-Sawin Academy					
	Candidates	Positions	Comp?	Candidates	Positions	Comp?	Candidates	Positions	Comp?	Candidates	Positions	Comp?			
2001	0	0	n/a	1	1	No	2	2	No	1	1	No			
2002	1	1	No	1	1	No	1	1	No	1	1	No			
2003	0	0	n/a	1	1	No	2	2	No	1	1	No			
2004	0	0	n/a	1	1	No	2	2	No	1	1	No			
2005	1	1	No	1	1	No	1	1	No	1	1	No			
2006	0	0	n/a	1	1	No	2	2	No	1	1	No			
2007	0	0	n/a	1	1	No	2	2	No	1	1	No			
2008	1	1	No	1	1	No	1	1	No	2	2	No			
2009	0	0	n/a	1	1	No	2	2	No	1	1	No			
2010	0	0	n/a	1	1	No	3	???	???	1	1	No			
2011	1	1	No	1	1	No	1	1	No	1	1	No			
<b># of competitive races:</b>			<b>0</b>	<b>of competitive races:</b>			<b>0</b>	<b>of competitive races:</b>			<b>0</b>	<b>of competitive races:</b>			<b>0</b>

Year	Library Trustees			Water Commission			Cemetery Commission			Planning Board					
	Candidates	Positions	Comp?	Candidates	Positions	Comp?	Candidates	Positions	Comp?	Candidates	Positions	Comp?			
2001	3	3	No	1	1	No	1	1	No	2	2	No			
2002	3	3	No	1	1	No	1	1	No	4	3	Yes			
2003	3	3	No	1	1	No	1	1	No	1	1	No			
2004	3	3	No	1	1	No	1	1	No	2	2	No			
2005	3	3	No	1	1	No	1	1	No	2	2	No			
2006	3	3	No	1	1	No	1	1	No	1	1	No			
2007	3	3	No	1	1	No	1	1	No	2	1	Yes			
2008	3	3	No	1	1	No	1	1	No	2	2	No			
2009	3	3	No	1	1	No	1	1	No	1	1	No			
2010	3	3	No	1	1	No	1	1	No	2	???	???			
2011	3	3	No	1	1	No	1	1	No	2	???	???			
<b># of competitive races:</b>			<b>0</b>	<b>of competitive races:</b>			<b>0</b>	<b>of competitive races:</b>			<b>0</b>	<b>of competitive races:</b>			<b>2</b>

Year	Dover Sherborn Regional Schl			Board of Health			Recreation Commission			Constables					
	Candidates	Positions	Comp?	Candidates	Positions	Comp?	Candidates	Positions	Comp?	Candidates	Positions	Comp?			
2001	1	1	No	1	1	No	1	1	No	2	2	No			
2002	1	1	No	1	1	No	1	1	No	0	0	n/a			
2003	1	1	No	1	1	No	1	1	No	0	0	n/a			
2004	2	1	Yes	1	1	No	1	1	No	2	2	No			
2005	2	2	No	2	1	Yes	1	1	No	0	0	n/a			
2006	1	1	No	1	1	No	1	1	No	0	0	n/a			
2007	2	1	Yes	2	1	Yes	1	1	No	2	2	No			
2008	1	1	No	1	1	No	1	1	No	0	0	n/a			
2009	1	1	No	1	1	No	1	1	No	1	1	No			
2010	1	1	No	1	1	No	1	1	No	2	2	No			
2011	1	1	No	1	1	No	1	1	No	0	0	n/a			
<b># of competitive races:</b>			<b>2</b>	<b>of competitive races:</b>			<b>2</b>	<b>of competitive races:</b>			<b>0</b>	<b>of competitive races:</b>			<b>0</b>



**6. Structure:**

The Town of Sherborn was incorporated in 1674 by an Act, not of the Commonwealth of Massachusetts, which did not exist yet, but of the Massachusetts Bay Colony. Over 300 years later, the Town does not yet have a formal charter laying out its structure. Instead, it operates under the Town bylaws, as well as a collection of Special Acts of the legislature, General Laws accepted by the Town, and other relevant state and federal statutes. We are noting all this because it is an important reminder that the current structure of the Town is not one assembled systematically through a process of planning, dialogue, and formal voting. Instead, the structure of Town government is the way it is because it evolved over the *centuries* as needs and demands changed.

Given our general belief that the complexity of municipal government is increasing faster than ever, it will probably not be surprising that we find that Sherborn’s current structure is inadequate to meet the Town’s needs. This manifests itself in many ways, but the most critical involves the decision about whether positions should be elected or appointed. The Collins Center has developed the following list of criteria that can assist communities thinking through these decisions.

Criteria supporting a position or board being <b>***ELECTED***</b>	Criteria supporting a position or board being <b>***APPOINTED***</b>
1. It has <b>significant</b> policy-making responsibility.	1. It has <b>minimal</b> policy-making responsibility.
2. It has <b>few</b> ministerial responsibilities and tasks whose performance is guided almost entirely by statute.	2. It has <b>many</b> ministerial responsibilities and tasks whose performance is guided almost entirely by statute.
3. Someone with little training or expertise in its area of work could <b>quickly and easily become effective</b> in the work.	3. Someone with little training or expertise in its area of work would <b>have significant difficulty in performing the work effectively, potentially creating significant risks for the community.</b>
4. Its role and tasks are <b>easily and widely</b> understood by the public.	4. Its role and tasks are <b>complicated and NOT easily and widely</b> understood by the public.
5. The nature of the position or board’s role makes it <b>relatively simple</b> for the public to evaluate the performance of its non-policy-making duties (for example, efficient use of resources, etc.).	5. The nature of the position or board’s role makes it <b>relatively difficult</b> for the public to evaluate the performance of its non-policy-making duties (for example, efficient use of resources, etc.).
6. The position or board is <b>helpful as a check or balance</b> against another center of power in the community.	6. The position or board is <b>not needed as a check or balance</b> against another center of power in the community.
7. It is <b>not critical</b> to the effective and efficient functioning of the government for this position or board to cooperate regularly with other officials.	7. It is <b>critical</b> to the effective and efficient functioning of the government for this position or board to cooperate regularly with other officials.
8. In the particular community in question, election for the position historically produces a <b>very competitive race between highly-qualified</b> candidates.	8. In the particular community in question, election for the position historically produces <b>little or no competition and few or no highly-qualified</b> candidates.

As noted in the first section, we were informed of numerous communications issues within Town government. This is important in this context because the structure may be part of the communications problem, as noted in criteria 7.

Although many of these criteria are subjective and must be debated openly in the community, in light of the election competitiveness problem noted in the last section, we would call attention to criteria 8. Given the communications problems noted, short of a strongly compelling argument on one of the other criteria, it would seem very hard to sustain the notion that a position should remain elected if the elections themselves produced no choice for the voters. (Without voter choice, the only accountability is the theoretical possibility that someone *could* decide to run for a position in question.)

A frequent argument that we hear made throughout the Commonwealth is that a Town should be run “more like a business.” In many ways Sherborn is not run in a business-like manner. It would be difficult to run a business if the Treasurer and Accounts Receivable Manager, as well as the chief revenue generator (the Assessors in the case of the Town), were completely autonomous. This is the situation in Sherborn. Structure is the problem, not poor management per se. As noted, most of the financial team and the chief record keeper are elected (e.g., Treasurer, Collector, Town Clerk). This means that these officials do not report to any Town official, and their efforts are not supervised, coordinated, or evaluated. This makes fostering a coherent and comprehensive management system difficult. Electing these administrative officials is a throw back to a point in time when these were part-time posts that required limited time and skill, and the operations of the Town were much smaller and simpler. None of the elected administrative officials exercises significant policy discretion, as their powers and duties are very specifically spelled out in the Massachusetts General Laws.

Note that we are not critiquing the performance or qualifications of the current incumbents. We anticipate that the Department of Revenue study will focus more intensively on financial performance. In our dealings with elected administrative officials, we found them by and large to be skilled and dedicated to the Town. We are simply saying that may not always be the case, given the elected status of the positions, the historical lack of competition for them, and the limited pool from which to draw elected officials, given the Town’s population of under five thousand.

Beyond the issues of elected versus appointed, we heard numerous expressions of frustration about the sheer number of boards and committees in Town. In our review of the Annual Report, we counted over 30 appointed boards and committees whose mandates seem to range from the extraordinarily broad (e.g., the Energy Committee) to the very narrow (e.g., “Dry Hydrant Action Committee,” “Pine Hill Access Road Committee,” etc.). Not only does this contribute to the communications problems, but it was suggested that the large number of boards and committees is affecting the ability of the Town to implement the work of these groups and to follow up on them.

The last area for potential structural change would be the Board of Selectmen itself. We have been made aware of a long history of divided Boards of Selectmen in Sherborn, where 2 to 1 votes are a common outcome on many issues. It has also come to our attention that there has been a long history of conflict among members of Boards of Selectmen in the Town. We note that this stress may be exacerbated by the size of the Board. So, while we encountered little interest in examining the issue of the size of the Board at this time, we note that there are pros and cons to three-member boards, and there are pros and cons to five-member boards.

## **7. Policy-making:**

We should start by noting one area of policy-making that appears to be going quite well: the annual budget process. This is usually a place where we find towns across the state having significant problems. Yet in Sherborn, with just a few exceptions, most staff and officials reported being quite satisfied with the budget process itself. This is especially noteworthy given the fiscal situation the Town is in. The Town should be commended for this.

We find two areas of policy-making where issues came to our attention. First, we find that there is a general lack of policy-making, goal-setting, and long-term planning by the Board of Selectmen. It is our perception that this is partially as a result of the current vacancy in the Town Administrator position and partially because of the particular division of responsibilities between the Board of Selectmen and the Town Administrator (and Assistant Town Administrator). Although it is possible that the website is not up-to-date, we note that the statement of goals and objectives for the Board of Selectmen currently posted was for the last fiscal year.

Second, we believe that the role of the Advisory Committee may be overly-focused on narrow financial matters at the expense of long-term strategic planning about Town finances. We believe that this is a result of the Committee's mandate in the Town bylaws (Chapter 4, pp. 4-6). Paraphrasing the bylaws, the Committee's role seems to involve: (1) preparing recommendations regarding Articles to be considered at Town Meeting and then advising Town Meeting on them, particularly with regard to the budget, and (2) investigating the "books, accounts, and management" of Town departments. The mandate does not appear to include long-term financial planning, which is a potential role that could be a significant asset to the Town. As far as we can ascertain, no official or board is responsible for comprehensive medium-term and long-term financial analysis and planning, a function we deem critical in the current context.

## **8. Morale:**

We believe that morale is a critical issue to the functioning of Town government and that this topic (while potentially more subjective than some of the others) is important to understanding the issues facing the Town. We believe that getting satisfaction from work and being eager to do a good job are not simply niceties for staff. We believe they have an effect on performance. If morale is low, that will have an impact on the quality of services provided and the efficiency of operations.

In Sherborn's case, it is our general observation that morale among Town staff is low. This appears to have several causes. First, the communications issues noted earlier may contribute to unnecessary problems and frustrations. (See Communications section of findings.)

Second, the budget situation has numerous negative effects on morale. Some staff worry that hours or jobs may be cut. Some have already faced cuts. Additionally, those staff who are truly passionate about their work see the cutbacks affecting the quality of the services they are able to provide. Finally, some staff feel as if there is a lack of understanding and appreciation by the Board of Selectmen and the public that they are being asked to do more and more with less (both in terms of time and money). It should be noted that staff nearly universally felt that they work in and for a Town with very high expectations for services, and that they (the staff) generally like that. It is when the public does not realize that they are being asked constantly to do more with less that they become frustrated.

Third, we believe it is important to acknowledge that the occasional decline in the level of civility in discussions among Selectmen over the last few years may also be damaging morale. As noted in our principles, we do not believe it is our place to comment on the specifics of this beyond noting that it can affect staff morale.

## **9. Regionalization:**

It was brought to our attention that the potential for regionalization has been discussed for several Sherborn departments and functions over the years (including dispatch and public health), but that nothing has come of it, with a few small exceptions.

Working in towns around the Commonwealth, we see a great deal of regionalization activity. This is highly unlikely to be a short-term phenomenon. The long-term structural issues facing municipal budgets, combined with the constant improvements in technology, mean that this trend will continue and in all likelihood pick up speed over time.

We believe that, given Sherborn's population, size, and capacities, regionalization will likely be in the future of many departments in the Town. We believe that Town staff and the public need to begin thinking through this sooner rather than later, so it can be done in the most well-planned and effective manner. Having said that, we do not believe that there is much that can be done for regionalization immediately in the Town. As should be clear from this report, we believe that there are many internal issues facing the Town that it should confront before beginning a major effort to share services and regionalize functions.

Looking down the road half a decade or more it appears that Sherborn, like many other towns, will need to actively consider purchasing fire, police, and other public services from other towns, or to develop some other form of regional service delivery. The Town's looming structural deficit, barring significant overrides, will force consideration of new regional service delivery mechanisms.

## **10. Town Administrator position:**

We have taken up the Town Administrator position last, because we think that it provides the most natural pivot between our findings and our recommendations.

The word that was most frequently used in our interviews to describe the historical relationship between Boards of Selectmen and Town Administrators in Sherborn would be "micro-manage." We see further evidence of this dynamic in the new job description for the Town Administrator, which provides a laundry list of activities and tasks without providing independent authority to do them, and in the fact that we were informed of a history of high turnover in the position in Sherborn.

We believe that the Town is caught in a catch-22 with regard to the role of the Town Administrator. The Board of Selectmen, as a result of past experience, has created a position with little or no independent authority and has indicated an interest in remaining deeply involved in the day-to-day operations of Town government. That is obviously the Board's prerogative. However, doing so will likely contribute to neutralizing the effectiveness of the person in the position and thereby increasing the chance that the person will burn out and/or leave quickly. If that happens, it could be seen as evidence that the Board needs to step up and take over even more responsibility. This will further weaken the position, and the process will repeat.

It has been suggested that the salary offered by Sherborn might not be sufficient to attract the kind of candidate who could effectively assume a greater level of authority and responsibility. We are not sure that this is the case. Although lower than the salaries of Town Administrators in some larger towns, the amount allocated is higher than that of many highly-skilled Town Administrators we have observed in other communities. We believe that it may be the position's role and authority, rather than its salary, that may be impacting the candidate pool.

Regardless of what the end structure looks like for the position, it is important to understand what particular characteristics are most important to the community for the position. Toward that end, we asked those we interviewed what they thought is important in a Town Administrator for Sherborn. The following items are what we heard most frequently. These are in no particular order and in some cases they are contradictory. They simply reflect what we have heard:

- Skilled communicator
- Leader who can bring everyone together and get people working toward a common mission
- Collective bargaining experience
- Someone tough enough to take heat from various factions in the community, since every decision is going to make some group unhappy
- Someone extremely organized
- Someone humble enough to do the work of the Board while letting it take the credit, but also able to stand up to the Board if it ever becomes necessary
- Grant-writing experience and skills
- Emotional intelligence
- Ability to collaborate
- Someone who understands, or is willing to take the time to learn about, each of the various departments
- Significant experience in municipal government, especially experience operating within serious fiscal constraints
- Someone smart, young, and hungry to prove him/herself
- Sense of humor

Finally, it was suggested by several interviewees that the person selected for the position must be extremely well-vetted before being hired.

## **RECOMMENDATIONS**

It is our general belief that recent and rapid changes in the demands on municipal government mean the need to find new ways of operating. While many of the basic service demands on municipal government – that is, providing police, fire, roads, inspections, parks, etc. – have not changed, the way that municipalities are required to provide them has changed and will continue changing. The growth in state and federal mandates, personnel and finance laws, potential liability for mistakes, and information technology available means that even continuing to provide the same services requires significant changes in how the Town does business. This underpins all of the following recommendations.

### **1. Town Administrator position:**

We know from experience that strengthening a Town Administrator often raises fears that this will change the Town's character. We appreciate the concern for maintaining the Town's character. However, we actually think strengthening the Town Administrator position is about *preserving* the Town's character, rather than changing it. We believe this for two reasons.

First, as the elected leaders of the Town's executive branch, the Board of Selectmen should have the time and capacity to set policy and direction for the Town. (For more on this, see next Recommendation.) Achieving this has grown more and more difficult, as the increasing complexities of operating a municipal government and the increasing statutory demands make decision-making both more difficult and potentially more consequential. A strengthened Town Administrator can lift some of the more mundane tasks and decisions from the Board of Selectmen. At the same time, the complexities and demands of municipal government have increased the need for professional and experienced management. While the Town is fortunate to have two members with long experience in the peculiarities of municipal government in Massachusetts serving at this time, there is no guarantee that future Boards will have members with this experience. Therefore, we believe it is important to have a position structured for an experienced professional over the long-term.

At the same time, we are aware how significant a change this recommendation would be for the Board and the Town. For that reason, we believe that the solution is to try out a strong Town Administrator with an experienced person brought in on an interim basis. This will allow the Board and Town to see whether a stronger position can work.

The interim Town Administrator cannot be tied to the existing Town Administrator job description. The interim needs a broad delegation of authority from the Board and responsibility for critical processes (e.g., budget, human resources, and procurement). The person should model the role of strong Town Administrator and also serve as an internal consultant through addressing systemic problems. Furthermore, for this arrangement to be fully effective, a condition of employment of the interim Town Administrator must be an agreement that the interim will not seek and will not be appointed to the position on a permanent basis.

### **2. Policy-making:**

Directly related to the above recommendation, we believe that the Board of Selectmen should be devoting more time to big-picture strategic issues, long-term planning, and goal-setting. We believe this as a general matter for the Town. Additionally, the current Board's core competencies and comparative advantages are not being used profitably by spending time debating the minutiae of the management of the Town's operations. Those competencies and advantages could be put to more valuable use thinking strategically

about issues such as long-term plans for revenue, regionalization opportunities, the development of performance measures, and other such issues.

We feel similarly about the Advisory Committee. Although it obviously needs to perform its advisory duties and its fiscal oversight duties, it could provide a valuable service increasing the time it devotes to long-term financial planning. This will especially be the case once the Town Administrator position is filled and the new person is integrated into the operations of the Town.

### **3. Structure:**

As noted, we believe the current structure of the Town government no longer adequately meets Sherborn's needs. For that reason, we do recommend several significant changes. First, we recommend beginning the process of converting some positions, boards, and committees from elected to appointed. Second, we recommend the Town move toward a consolidated finance department using the provisions of Chapter 43C of the General Laws. Finally, we recommend reducing the number of appointed boards and committees.

We believe it is absolutely essential for the Board to get the sequencing of these structural changes right, especially given the recent tensions in Town government. Getting the sequencing wrong will likely prevent the changes from occurring at all or will lessen the effectiveness of the outcome. We make three recommendations with regard to the sequencing: (1) Start now, (2) Go slowly, and (3) Offer to grandfather in the current incumbents of the various positions, boards, and committees.

The logic for these three steps is clear. The Town needs to start now, because delay begets delay. There is no reason to wait. At the same time, there are several reasons to go slowly. First, the public needs to be kept informed of the potential changes and needs to be educated as to why they are necessary. Providing that education takes time. Second, these are complicated changes to make, and the Town is heading into the busiest portion of the annual budget process. The Town needs to be able to spend the time planning for the changes. Third, the vacancy in the Town Administrator position could complicate the challenges of conversion and should be addressed before the serious work of conversion begins.

As we previously mentioned, we believe incumbents should be given the opportunity to continue their service by being grandfathered into the current positions. Structural change is not well-served by a simultaneous loss of institutional knowledge that the incumbents of these positions have.

One final comment on structure. Although it was clear that there was little enthusiasm for moving to a five-member Board at this time, we do encourage the Town to revisit this issue periodically to determine whether the three-member Board meets its current needs and culture.

### **4. Operations:**

As noted, the Town needs to find new ways of doing things. We recommend that the Town specifically work on improving operations in the six areas described in the Operations section of the Findings:

1. Payroll processes
2. Purchasing
3. Procurement and contract management
4. Alignment of Town Hall department office hours
5. Documents management
6. Facilities management

At the same time, we make one over-arching operational suggestion. We recommend that the Town actively support the cross-training of Town Hall staff. The goal should be that every staff person in Town Hall can answer routine questions about the processes and issues handled in every other Town Hall department. (We recognize that there will always be and should be specialization for higher-level of operations of each department.) Cross-training can vastly improve customer service and can cut down on the time that staff has to spend responding to frustrations of residents who were unable to get the answers they needed on a prior visit or call. It can also lead to new ideas, as best practices for customer service, forms, data collection, etc. are shared among departments. Finally, understanding the work and challenges of other departments can help contribute to a shared sense of mission among staff.

## **5. Human Resources:**

To respond to a lack of clarity around human resources practices and responsibilities, we recommend (once the permanent Town Administrator position has been filled) that the Board of Selectmen or the Moderator convene a meeting of the Board of Selectmen, Moderator, Personnel Board, Advisory Committee, and other key department heads to have a dialogue about what roles each entity or person will play in the various human resources-related processes. We recommend that the discussion be focused solely on process and that any references to substantive existing or prior human resources issues be prohibited. There are any number of potentially-effective ways to divide up this work, as long as all parties are clear on who will have what roles and responsibilities.

## **6. Finances:**

In addition to the operational changes recommended above, which we hope will provide some savings, and the suggestions regarding financial planning, we encourage the Town to work on the revenue side.

As noted, we believe that the Town's reliance on residential property taxes is a major concern. To address this, we encourage the Town to continue its research into both expanding the number of parcels on the tax rolls and investigating what long-term planning would be needed to increase the commercial tax base of the Town. We are aware that there has been talk about forming a committee to explore potential uses of land that would place more parcels on the tax rolls. We encourage that to go forward, but we recommend that the Committee include both those generally in favor of and opposed to development. It is our understanding that the Town is deeply divided on the issue of development, and therefore both sides must be at the table from the very beginning if development is being considered. As difficult as that may be at times, we believe it is the only way that the Town will eventually be successful in finding development solutions that are acceptable to a majority of the population.

## **7. Communications:**

Some of the issues around communications will resolve themselves with the filling of the Town Administrator vacancy. Beyond that, we recommend that the Town have more regular meetings. We are not in favor of meetings for meetings' sake. However, when we encounter a situation where communications have been problematic, we do encourage the municipality to err on the side of risking having too many meetings rather than too few. There are two types of meetings we would recommend holding regularly (at whatever tempo feels right to the Board and others): (1) Department head meetings, and (2) Town Hall staff meetings. These meetings do not have to be long, but they should provide an opportunity for everyone to be informed about what else is going on in Town Hall, what issues are out there, and what may be coming down the road in the near future.



## **8. Morale**

As with communication, morale is something that may be improved as a result of fixing some of the other issues noted here. Having said that, we do encourage everyone connected with Town government to take whatever steps they can to renew a sense of shared mission and public service. Given the hard work and dedication we saw in many elected officials, department heads, and staff, we do not think it will take too much to help recapture or restore a shared sense of purpose.

## **9. Regionalization**

As noted, we believe that Sherborn will eventually head down the path toward sharing and regionalizing more services and functions. However, we do believe that before it looks at those possibilities, the Town needs to deal with the issues described elsewhere in this report. Solving those other issues now will provide the foundation for looking at regionalization in the future.