

Public comments related to Feb 16 Finance Committee meeting (as of Feb 16, 2022)

Forwarded to members of the Finance Committee on Dec 9, 2021 by Wendy Bogusz:

From: Jane Alessandra
Sent: Thursday, December 9, 2021 4:38 PM
To: WendyB-Montague Selectboard
Cc: StevenE - Montague Town Administrator
Subject: Proposed personnel increase Steve Ellis

Hi Wendy,

When I asked where I could send the letter below, Steve wrote me, "The key boards on the front end of these decisions are the Selectboard and Finance Committee, who consider what to include in the budget and town meeting warrant. If you wanted to send a letter to those boards, it could be so-addressed and submitted to the Selectboard's office to the attention of Wendy Bogusz."

So, I send this to you, Wendy! Could you forward this to the appropriate people?

Many thanks,
Jane Alessandra

Dear Selectboard and Finance Committee,

I wish to support Steve Ellis' proposed increase in personnel in its entirety, as discussed in SB meetings on 11/15/21 & 11/29/21.

I felt Steve's argument was compelling, thoughtful and showed an overarching understanding of the needs and goals of both today and of the future in our community. During the Q&A, Steve always had clear and in-depth answers describing both the strengths and weaknesses of our town governance.

I believe we have a strong and thoughtful leader in Steve Ellis. Having hired him and having seen the quality of his work for these past years, I feel we should now listen to his experience as he outlines what he feels are our vulnerabilities if we remain understaffed, and more importantly, our significant opportunities if we allow ourselves the personnel to focus on human resources, grant-writing and long-term planning.

In the 11/15/21 meeting, he said "We're just not making progress in some fundamental areas... a much more assertive and thoughtful financial strategy. Grantmaking, grant development.

There's much more money in the system and the way that state and federal government bring money to municipalities is through competitive programs that have to be implemented with no additional staff typically paid for them. We have a dizzying number of grants and I worry about our capacity to effectively manage, close out and effectively report on all of those grants with our current level of staffing." I believe the benefits of having adequate staff to proactively guide this town, manage current projects, and apply to the best grants to pay for desired growth, would massively outweigh the cost of new personnel.

Thank you for your consideration,
Jane Alessandra

Forwarded to Finance Committee members by Jen Audley on Dec 12, 2021:

From: **Mike Naughton**

Date: Thu, Dec 9, 2021 at 12:23 PM

Subject: Comments on Increasing Capacity in the Town Administrator's Office

To: Rich Kuklewicz , Chris Boutwell , Matt Lord

Cc: Steven Ellis, Wendy Bogusz (Selectmen) , Jen Audley , John T. Hanold

Dear Rich, Chris, and Matt,

I've seen some of the discussions of Steve's proposal to two new positions to the Selectboard budget, and I'm writing to offer some comments as you and the Finance Committee consider this.

First, let me say that Steve Ellis is talented, skilled, and energetic, and he clearly works very hard. Also, it seems fairly clear that the job as currently defined is too big for one person, and some functions (e.g. personnel management, facilities maintenance) have not consistently received proper attention since well before Steve came on board. It seems fair to conclude, then, that some sort of additional capacity may be necessary.

However, the process so far (at least as I've seen) is that Steve has brought one solution to the Selectboard, and discussion has focused on that solution. I think it might be wise to take a step back and consider whether other solutions are possible. What Steve has proposed may be the best option, but if you haven't looked at others how can you be sure?

One basic choice is whether to continue the model of a Town Administrator's office with all of its current responsibilities, or whether to transfer some of those responsibilities to one or more other offices (perhaps new ones). Steve's proposal follows the first choice, but I think the second one deserves some discussion. One idea, for example, would be to establish an Economic Development office, with responsibility for both economic and community development and facilities and infrastructure planning and management. Arguably, that would take a big load off the Administrator, and it might possibly bring added efficiencies. Right now, economic and community development seem to be spread among various offices: the Town Administrator does some, the Planning office does some, and MEDIC does some (with the current planner moonlighting as its "coordinator"). As I understand it, there are advantages to having an entity like MEDIC for at least some types of

economic development -- maybe MEDIC needs a full time director instead of a part time coordinator?

Those are just some ideas, and I'm sure there are others. My point is not that they're better than the proposal before you -- they may not be. My point is that the problem of not having enough capacity to do all the work that is expected can potentially be solved in various ways, and it would be better if the options were more fully explored before choosing one of them.

Whatever the town chooses, I think it should do so with as full an understanding of the benefits and challenges of the various choices. As Rich pointed out in a recent meeting, once decisions like this are made, they can be very difficult to undo. I encourage you to take the time necessary to fully consider this, and I also encourage you not to feel bound by the timetable of the current budget cycle. I think Steve has been typically proactive in bringing forward this proposal, but we all know that this is not a new problem -- the town has been living with it for years. Finding a solution will be a good thing, but I think you should take the time you need to do it right.

Thank you for your consideration,
Mike Naughton

Received by Jen Audley and others January 17, 2022. Message includes includes request for Carolyn Olsen to forward to Finance Committee members:

From: **Mike Naughton**

Date: Mon, Jan 17, 2022 at 7:31 PM

Subject: Minutes, etc. on Montague's web site

To: Rich Kuklewicz Matt Lord , Chris Boutwell , Steven Ellis <townadmin@montague-ma.gov>, Debra Bourbeau, Town Clerk <townclerk@montague-ma.gov>, Carolyn Olsen <accountant@montague-ma.gov>, Jen Audley, Wendy Bogusz (Selectmen) <selectscty@montague-ma.gov>

Cc: Nockleby, Janel , Jeffrey Singleton

Hi everyone,

I hope this finds you all well. I'm writing you all because I'm not sure whom specifically to address this to, and I suspect most of you may be involved in some way. (Carolyn -- I'm including Jen Audley, but would you pass this along to the other members of the Finance Committee? Thank you!)

At the Selectboard's 1/3/22 meeting, during public comment, Janel Nockleby mentioned that she had been unable to find information about discussions of the Farren on either the Selectboard's or the Historical Commission's meeting pages on Montague's website. Steve Ellis commented that he believed that the selectboard meeting minutes were up to date, but nothing was said about the Historical Commission, and the discussion moved on.

This prompted me to write, as I have noticed that posting of minutes and other information to Montague's website has been inconsistent. The Selectboard and the Finance Committee both do quite well posting agendas and minutes, but from what I've seen other boards and committees do not. In a quick survey of the "Boards and Committees" page on the site, I did not find any other board or committee with posted minutes for recent meetings, and many did not have agendas. Also, on other pages, no information has been posted about town elections since May, 2019, and no votes have been posted for town meetings since October, 2019.

I'm not trying to blame anyone or call anyone out. I've heard in the past that responsibility for posting to the town's website is on each individual board or committee, and I've heard from Deb Bourbeau that the pandemic and redistricting have added a significant workload to her department. I get that, but here we are heading into 2022, and I wonder if there's any prospect that things will get better. Ms. Nockleby's comment points to the fact that if people want information, they're likely to go to the website first. Let's face it, in 2022 that's what most of us do when we want to know about anything. The town's website could (and, I believe, should) be a reliable go-to source for information about town government has done and is doing. Right now, it's not.

Since the Selectboard and the Finance Committee are in the process of discussing both the FY23 budget and topics for an upcoming special town meeting, I hope you can spend a little time talking about whether there are ways to fix this, and to ensure that information on the website is current, complete, and accurate. I'm sure there are various solutions, and I don't want to recommend any particular one, but I think some combination of clearly defining responsibilities, perhaps increasing budgets in one or more areas, and perhaps getting temporary help to deal with the current backlog would do the trick.

Thank you very much for your attention.

Yours sincerely,

Mike Naughton

Jen Audley response to Mike Naughton (Selectboard, Steve Ellis and Carolyn Olsen copied), Jan 19, 2022:

Thanks for sharing these thoughts, Mike, and thanks also for your op-ed in the current issue of *The Montague Reporter*. I will try to broach the topic of improving the overall user-friendliness of the Town's website during the budget process, again.

I've given it quite a lot of thought already, though, so I'll share my two cents. As one of a rather small group of people who can actually look under the hood of the website and make changes, the conclusion I've reached is that to make it better we'd need someone on staff who has dedicated time and skill for community engagement/communication work at a systems level on an ongoing basis (which would need to be in their job description) ... and perhaps a summer intern or a contractual arrangement with Montague Webworks to tackle a substantial temporary project involving renaming and moving many many files.

Another way to make it consistent would be to set expectations much lower - eg base them on "What can we expect the least technically savvy volunteer clerk on a committee to do?" ... but that line of thinking points to a scenario where all meeting minutes are available on request and nothing gets uploaded to the website, which seems worse to me.

And now since I've got your attention ;) I've attached the current budget calendar and a two-page description of how this year's budget process is shaping up. I hope to see you and hear from you at some of these meetings!

Jen

Mike Naughton reply to Jen Audley ((Selectboard, Steve Ellis and Carolyn Olsen copied) Jan 22, 2022:

Thanks, Jen!

I don't know what the town's website looks like under the hood, so I'll defer to your expertise there. If it's anything like other websites that I am familiar with, though, I suspect that a one-time up-front effort to a) come up with an overall plan for how the site should work, and then b) reconfigure the existing site according to that plan might go a long way to making things better. Once that were in place, the ongoing process of posting new things could go on more or less as it has been (though personally I think it would be good to add some mechanism for making sure that things do get posted in a timely manner). The up-front effort would be considerable (though

temporary), but the town has various considerable projects on its plate, and I do think that having a good website is important. I think the key would be to have a town employee step up and agree to be project manager, with the understanding that they would become the webmaster going forward. There would have to be compensation, of course, but other positions are being proposed so perhaps that could be added to the list (I don't see it as being full time).

Thank you for the budget calendar and process. I may try to join some of the meetings, but the timing is not great for me. I have been trying to watch them (and the Selectboard meetings), but not in real time. I was glad that you noted at the 1/12 meeting that people are welcome to communicate by email -- I expect I will continue at least to do that. :-) I'm also glad that members of the Fin Comm may try to write pieces for the newspaper -- I think that would be very helpful.

Again, thanks for listening!

Mike

From: **Mike Naughton**

To: montaguefinancecommittee@gmail.com

Received Feb 14, 2022; forwarded by Jen Audley to committee members, BettyLou Mallet, Carolyn Olsen and Steve Ellis Feb 15, 2022

Dear Finance Committee,

I hope this reaches you before your upcoming discussion of the proposal to increase capacity in the Selectboard office. I hope to attend your meeting Wednesday, but I may not be able to.

After reading the proposal, and watching the 11/15/21, 11/29/21, and 11/25/22 Selectboard meetings where it was discussed, I share many of John Hanold's concerns. I've attached an email that I sent the Selectboard back in December (which you may have seen), and my thinking hasn't changed much since then.

My main concern at this point is that while there has been a good deal of discussion about the need to increase capacity (which seems clear), there has been almost no discussion about alternative ways of doing so. For example, the suggestion that infrastructure and facilities management might be located in the DPW was met with the comment that, basically, the DPW doesn't have the time or expertise. Well, the motivation for this proposal is that no one has the time or expertise in the current environment, so why is it the best solution to move those responsibilities to the Selectboard's office instead of enhancing the DPW? Similarly with HR -- much of that function is fairly specialized and requires particular skills and knowledge; why would it not be better to locate it in its own department? Many of the Selectboard office's current responsibilities have been acquired by default -- no one else was doing them. As the need to do them well has become more prominent, wouldn't it make sense to ask whether the Selectboard's office is still the best place for them?

My own opinion is that it's not necessarily the Finance Committee's job to discuss questions like these, but it is the Finance Committee's job to make sure that the questions have been discussed and that sufficient attention has been paid to coming up with the best answers. If that hasn't happened, I think there's good reason to be concerned about simply going ahead with a change of this magnitude. At one of the meetings, John noted that his preference would be to take a slower and more step-by-step approach, and I very much agree. It was noted several times during the discussions that these are not new problems, and the town will continue to function even if no changes are recommended at this time. As I said in my earlier email, I believe this is a case where it's important to take the time necessary to do things right.

Thank you for listening,
Mike Naughton