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Editorial: Seeking stability in Southampton

Monday, January 22, 2018

This month marks a fresh start for Southampton now that a new town administrator is on the job. We hope that Edward J. Gibson, a former West Springfield mayor, brings stability to a position that has experienced controversy, turnover and interim appointments during the past six-plus years.

It's been more than a year since the town has had a permanent, full-time administrator since Heather Budrewicz resigned in November 2016. Since then, the job has been held part-time by Robert T. Markel. Before Budrewicz's two-year tenure as administrator, the job was filled on an interim basis for 2½ years by Regina Shea-Sullivan.

In the past, the town administrator's salary has been a major factor in turnover and in not attracting the strongest pool of candidates to fill the job permanently.

Shea-Sullivan, who was earning about \$45,000, asked for a \$10,000 raise in July 2012, which was denied. She was then passed over by the Select Board for the permanent job and resigned in April 2014, citing hostile working conditions. She subsequently filed a lawsuit against the town and former highway superintendent Edward J. Cauley, alleging sexual harassment and workplace discrimination. Cauley has denied the allegations in the lawsuit, which is pending in U.S. District Court.

Two other candidates were offered the job, but turned it down in late 2013, including one applicant who said the position paid less than his current job as a town manager.

Budrewicz eventually was hired and served from April 2014 to November 2016, when she left to take the job of town administrator in Ashburnham. She was earning about \$58,000 when she left Southampton.

In Markel, town officials found a capable and experienced part-timer to lead Town Hall during the past year. Markel is a former Springfield mayor who has spent his retirement years temporarily filling town administrator posts around the state.

However, employing a part-time town administrator at \$50 per hour is not the ideal solution to filling a demanding job that requires a full-time administrator. Too much can fall through the cracks, especially given the “extremely fragmented” and “decentralized” nature of Southampton’s town government, as consultant Bernard Lynch of Community Paradigm Associates put it when presenting a report to the town in November 2016. Lynch found that the town could be at risk of “serious financial and legal management issues,” if it did not take steps to create a more effective, centralized government.

“It doesn’t appear anyone is in charge,” Lynch said at the time. “It’s not clear what the town administrator does.”

In recent months, the town has made smart moves by increasing the pay for the administrator by 37 percent to \$80,000 annually, and conducting one of its more thorough job searches in recent memory. The town hired a consultant to assist with developing a job description and determining appropriate pay for the administrator, and a screening committee made up of residents and officials reviewed a pool of about a dozen candidates and interviewed finalists.

The result is that Southampton appears to have found an experienced candidate who is familiar with western Massachusetts. Gibson, who started earlier this month, served 12 years as mayor of West Springfield where he oversaw construction of a \$107 million high school, and later worked as town administrator in Becket.

Southampton is a small town with a population of 6,000 and a \$16 million annual budget. But its size doesn’t diminish the importance of stability in the job of town administrator, the person most responsible for ensuring that town government operates effectively and efficiently. The town administrator serves as the chief financial and administrative officer and is a key player in managing the town’s finances, supervising departments and employees, interacting with state and federal governments, executing contracts, and maintaining records.

We hope that Gibson proves to be strong town administrator who helps lead the effort to follow through on the consultant’s recommendations to improve the structure of town government. Ultimately, we expect that will be beneficial to the taxpayers in Southampton.

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