

# Wong selected for South Hadley Town Administrator position

July 2, 2021 | Danielle Eaton  
[deaton@thereminder.com](mailto:deaton@thereminder.com)



**The South Hadley Selectboard interviewed the final two candidates for the position of town administrator during their June 30 meeting, ultimately selecting Lisa Wong for the position on July 2.**

Photo credit: Zoom

SOUTH HADLEY – The final two candidates for South Hadley’s Town Administrator position were interviewed during a meeting of the Selectboard on June 30, and on July 2, Lisa Wong was unanimously appointed to the position.

The June 30 meeting began with chair Jeff Cyr expressing his gratitude for the screening committee that had dedicated their time. Bernie Lynch of the consulting firm Paradigm Associates LLC, who the town hired to conduct the search for candidates, facilitated the interview process.

Wong was the first candidate to be interviewed by the Selectboard via Zoom. Lynch led the interview by asking questions on specific topics with members of the Selectboard being given the opportunity to ask follow-up questions. She was first asked how she got into municipal management and why she was interested in the position. Wong said it was slightly “surreal” to see her box on the Zoom call as she had been watching some of the meetings the board had prior to her interview. Wong said she was currently the town manager of Winchester for almost three years and had previously worked as an elected official in Fitchburg for eight years.

Wong went on to say she lived in close proximity to South Hadley for a few years and she’d “married into Western Massachusetts.” Additionally, she said she had granddaughters who live in Holyoke and her husband had started a business in Holyoke.

“This is where I grew up, but life has led to a growing family and my husband has a growing business,” she said. Wong said while she was a professional, she couldn’t “not love and brag about the place I work.” Wong expressed that she really loved what she did and “everyday is different and I just love that about municipal government.”

When asked to describe her leadership style, Wong said “transparent, adaptable and collaborative.” She said her experience has shown her how “flexible I can be” and being able to adapt to a different form of government, different priorities and different community needs. She said she was always “doing cost-benefit analysis” and figuring out how to be efficient, but realizing “I’m not an island” and she needed to work with others.

Wong said she was able to engage with residents on a much simpler level by helping them understand how they could help, do their part and treat it as “an opportunity to do better.”

“Whenever something sounds terrible I’m not the person saying ‘it’s terrible’ it’s an opportunity to educate and do better with money,” she said. Wong added that she liked to approach problems creatively to help people get engaged and solve problems in town.

When asked about her philosophy with budget and approaches she may bring to South Hadley, she said she liked to find a way that her decisions are “shaped appropriately” and find better outcomes. Vice Chair Sarah Etleman described town meeting and how there were times when residents wanted to propose amendments to the budget. She asked Wong how she got residents involved and when the best time for them to get involved in the progress.

Wong said residents could get involved at any time and she was “a tool for people to use.” This, she said, would allow for people to get engaged and help educate them. She said in Fitchburg she had department heads do small segments of their most frequently asked questions, which were then broadcast on public media.

Committee member Andrea Miles said constituents she talked to felt as though while the town was stable, they were just “plodding along” and there hadn’t been a lot of growth. She asked Wong how she would approach such a situation to find an approach that would allow them to “not stay static.” Wong said she would consider a variety of approaches, including strategies she’d used before such as walk audits and the formation of neighborhood committees. “The whole idea is using these tools and meeting people where they’re at,” she said.

Lynch expressed that the board members would likely want to hear her opinion on diversity, equity and inclusion as it was a topic that was important to many residents. Wong spoke highly of current Town Administrator Mike Sullivan who she said she'd worked with on the Diversity, Equity and Inclusion Committee (DEI). She said South Hadley had been well represented and she'd been impressed with Sullivan's willingness to listen and learn. Wong went on to say she'd recently completed a course that teaches foundations, principals and vocabulary. She said she considered herself a "lifelong learner" who was always willing to continue learning and she was willing to take risks, but would need help and support from the Selectboard.

Wong said she needed a board who understood it was difficult at times for her to be in spaces surrounding such a topic. She said became emotional as she said, should she be selected for the position, a lot of "emotional labor" would be placed on her as she would be the only candidate of color. Selectboard member Andrea Miles thanked Wong for sharing her experience and said she felt the town needed to be more mindful of placing emotional labor on people of color. Miles said the town needed to take some "strong, visible" steps in policy, action and education to address diversity and inclusion.

When asked about the future of the town in relation to COVID-19, Wong said she was curious to see how funds would be spent on water, infrastructure and wastewater projects. She said she felt as though there was not often "a big pool of funds for equity" and she hoped that the board would be willing to listen to her ideas and plans to create long lasting change.

The second candidate to be interviewed by the board was Redmond Jones. He began by giving an overview of his experience. He said one of his daughters had recently been accepted to play basketball at Merrimack College and the opportunity to be closer to her was appealing. He said he was from Cleveland, OH, and had initially wanted to be a police officer, but had the opportunity to be mentored by the first African-American city manager, which exposed him to municipal government. From there, he said his passion and desire to be involved in municipal government grew substantially. Currently, he said he was living in Iowa in his second job as city manager.

When asked about his management and leadership style, Jones said liked to lead by example. "I don't like to ask folks that work for me and with me to do something I won't do," he said. He added that he was a leader that worked collaboratively with teams.

"You can't get ahead of everybody, you have to spend the time to bring people along," he said. Jones said he felt it was important for challenges, projects and tasks to "grow beyond my energy." He added that he felt that "a drive to get things done," needed to be cultivated rather than treating people simply as subordinates.

Jones was then asked about his experience and methods in developing a budget. He said while everyone wanted to be "fiscally conservative," that "smart risks" were needed to move forward. He said while exploring and explaining options available to policy makers were sometimes tedious and challenging, he did well in such areas and was proud of his creation of a capital improvement levy where he was currently. He said cities often looked at it as a way to tax, however, he saw it as a gap finance tool.

He went on to explain the dire position the city had been in when he arrived, stating that he had to implement a moratorium on municipal projects and a tax increase. Jones said he had only ever

proposed a tax increase two times in his career and felt as though if a tax increase and where the additional revenue was going couldn't be explained, the increase wasn't needed.

Etelemen asked how Jones would navigate the differing bylaws based on different state requirements and immerse himself in South Hadley. Jones said he would learn as much as he could as quickly as he could. He said he had worked in several different states and many bylaws share similar attributes while having differences. He said he would immerse himself in the history to know and understand bylaws, state laws and intentions behind documents.

Following the interviews, the Selectboard met for an early meeting on the morning of July 2 to make their final decision regarding which candidate should become the next Town Administrator. After discussion about both candidates, they decided to offer the position to Wong.

Should Wong accept the position, she will take over for Sullivan. Sullivan was initially scheduled to retire in June, but extended his contract with the town due to the search taking longer than the town anticipated. Wong would begin serving as the South Hadley town administrator officially in September when Sullivan retires.