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To the Town Administrator Screening Committee:

Thank you for the opportunity in allowing me to answer the candidate essay questions. Please allow me to get right into my thoughts on the important technical and philosophical questions you have asked of me.

Question #1

The onboarding of a new staff member, and specifically a new Town Administrator (TA) is a very important process. Therefore, I believe it is important to engage all of the staff members and volunteers in an introduction as quickly as possible. This means establishing individual meetings with Department Heads and attending as many board/committee meetings as practicable. The meetings allow you to introduce yourself and this provides you with the opportunity to relieve any anxiety the staff may have about a new TA, and to show them that you'll be their most dependable partner.

However, these meetings are not just for the Town Administrator to talk, they are also an opportunity to ask the staff and volunteers about their roles and about the things that are important to them. I will need this information to set priorities and support Department Heads, which in turn, will build trust.

Equally important is to understand what the Board of Selectmen (BOS) is expecting of the TA. Success will be delayed without proper input from the BOS. Once I meet with staff, boards/committees, and the BOS, a picture can be formed and priorities for action can be set. In identifying top priorities, it is important to see what projects are currently under way, what projects are time sensitive, and what actions items require immediate attention to avoid operational disruptions. For example, there may be construction projects currently happening that need monitoring, grant deadlines to meet, or key personnel that are nearing retirement.

Question #2

A focus on the financials of the Town will be important for success. For example, the conversation about Operating Budget and Capital Budget needs should be a continuous conversation but focus on yearly planning should begin early. Meetings with Department Heads should happen often and early because no one will understand the needs of a department better than the manager of that department. Items such as Police patrol cars and Fire Department Scott Air-Paks can be expensive but are vital for these departments to perform their core functions. Poor planning can lead to poor performance of these departments.

Additionally, in order to build a budget, I would work closely with the Finance Director to get an accurate picture of the revenue forecast. From there, I can begin to look at things like contractual obligations, which will take up a large amount of the revenue from year to year. Employee benefits, such as health insurance, will also take up a large piece of the budget as well. Debt service, pension, and OPEB liabilities are another on-going regular cost. From there, you can begin spending or saving money on things that are a priority to the Town and can seek input from Department Heads on operational needs.

The Capital Budget is a document used to track and fund big items that are paid for infrequently. Recently, Boxford invested in the development of a comprehensive Capital Plan so I would have a good starting point when I begin to manage these large purchases. Boxford has recently become eligible for more grants from the State by becoming a Green Community and a Municipal Vulnerability Planning Community and was able to secure funding for projects because of this. Additionally, Boxford has successfully been taking advantage of a multitude of grants that the state offers. I would work to keep myself abreast of existing grants, new grants, and the opportunity to gain new statuses that might supply additional funding sources. Also, a regular review of other non-tax impact Town funds, like the Conservation fund, should be a priority so that we can seek to use these funds when necessary for important projects. Between grants and other non-tax impact revenue sources, many items can be funded without a direct impact to the taxpayer.

Another item for consideration that every public employee has had on his or her mind for the last year and a half is the COVID-19 pandemic. For local leaders, it has been a challenging experience that has taught us so much. For many, it was a wake-up call that Health Departments may have been underfunded for a long

time. We can now see how vital they have been during the pandemic and new consideration should be given as to how we fund and staff them going forward.

Certain capital investments have been made during the pandemic and it's important that these investments are not wasted and become repurposed. For example, if vaccine freezers were purchased, Towns may consider hosting flu vaccination clinics in the future. Many towns purchased laptops and software such as Zoom to make meetings and working remote possible. As employees return, laptops can be repurposed for in-person meetings and staff can use Zoom when getting together is difficult but time is of the essence. As times change, it is important to review investments that Boxford has made and repurpose items as needed so that they continue adding value to the organization.

Additionally, what should also be considered is the change to the work culture that took place during the pandemic. Our biggest and most important asset is our employee workforce and many of them became accustomed to working from home and still desire to do so. Where possible, it may be advisable to allow employees to work occasionally from home. This flexibility can become another powerful tool towards employee satisfaction, which means less turn over, and higher job satisfaction. For the employer, less turnover means less wasted money in lost productivity and job searches. Higher job satisfaction may also lead to an increase in productivity, which means more work for the same dollar the Town spends.

Question #3

For a Town Administrator, building relationships is key in a collaborative organization like a municipality. It would be my ideal situation to build the kind of relationship with the BOS where the members know they can give me a task and trust that I will get it done. I would also work to build enough trust and respect so that my technical opinion is valued. Any good TA becomes an asset to their board in this way.

This type of relationship is also important to have with the staff. I want to earn their trust so they know they can come to me whenever they need help. I would want them to think of their TA as a dependable person who can help them solve any problem. Last year, one of our union stewards was very unhappy because they received a complaint from an employee that was claiming the Town was treating them unfairly. In order to de-escalate the situation, I allowed the steward to tell me the whole story without interruption then began to address their concerns. By being a good active-listener, I was able to quickly pick up on some pieces of information that were not accurate. I explained where the misunderstanding was and assured the steward that I would immediately reach out to the employee to help resolve their issue, which I did. After speaking with the employee and clarifying some things with them, all parties were satisfied.

With School Committees, it is important to keep an open channel with them for several reasons. Their work affects a lion's share of the budget and one of the most important public facing assets. Furthermore, if the TA does not communicate with them, they may not fully grasp the budget situation with the Town. This could lead to budget difficulty and unnecessary conflict due to a lack of communication. Additionally, it's important for the TA to listen to their needs as well. They have many capital investments and without the proper planning, repairs and upgrades could fall behind, effecting School operations for decades to come.

Finally, the relationship of the TA with the residents is one where the TA is the top manager who is ultimately responsible for the services that the residents receive. The TA provides the services that the residents want, in accordance with the policy directives of the BOS, as efficiently and effectively as possible. People want to see their streets paved and want to feel safe. This means that Public Works must respond to road issues quickly and that Police and Fire are protecting people and property whenever there is danger. The residents want someone they can go to when they have a problem with a service they're being provided and the TA's office must be where this feedback is gathered and utilized. A good TA never forgets that he/she gets to do the people's work because of the people.

Thank you again for allowing me to write to you directly and taking the time to review my response to your essay questions.

Sincerely,

James J. Ryan