

Minutes
SELECT BOARD

Wednesday, April 21, 2021, 6:00 p.m.
Via Zoom

Present for Select Board: Robert Armstrong, Chair, Erica Goleman, Phil Kantors

Others Present: Tom Hutcheson, Town Administrator; Ross Perry, Interim Town Administrator; Louise M. Beckett, Assistant to the Town Administrator

Public Comments *none*

New Business

6:10 p.m.: Interview Rebecca Stone for the position of Town Administrator

Bob opened the interview meeting at 6:20 p.m. by greeting Rebecca Stone and asking the first question: Why is working in Conway attractive to you?

Rebecca replied that she has family here, that she has worked in Franklin County as well as in the Berkshires and that she prefers Massachusetts to Vermont, where she has also worked. People in Conway are down to earth and come together when they need to despite differences on many matters.

Phil asked the next question: What is the way in which you communicate and manage? Give examples.

Rebecca: Some boards want regular reports; there are staff meetings in Clarksburg every two weeks; I have found that you can work through things you wouldn't have expected to resolve in meetings. For example: Our water district – its infrastructure is starting to fail; everyone is going after monies for their infrastructure so they're all in competition: We have decided for this project, a regional approach will work. It's a good way to problem-solve.

Phil: What is your leadership style?

Rebecca: I believe there's a disconnect in Clarksburg; people's attitude that 'that's the way we've always done things' can be frustrating. Department heads report to me but there's a disconnect there; I need the boards to support me.

Phil: What would be your worst and best jobs?

Rebecca: The worst? I couldn't tell you – there's not been one any worse than the other. I prefer to focus on the positive. I think it's important to learn the personalities of those I work with. One concern I have is with the schools having own budget and the town having its own.

Phil: What's one thing about yourself you feel you need to work on and what's the best thing about you.

Rebecca: I need to work on taking a break. I get so wrapped up in work I forget what time it is. I think my best trait is that I'm thorough; self-motivated. I like things to be perfect. I'm passionate about having honest answers for the public.

Erica: Conway has trouble getting people on different boards and committees. How would you hope to engage committees?

Rebecca: It depends on what board it is. For example, the Agriculture Commission got the right to farm bylaw passed, but now seems to be missing people to serve. How about those who have served in the past. We have to be honest about what's involved, and about the amount of time it takes. Need to reach out.

Erica: Tom started something called Town Academy – to explain to people in town how town municipal government works – What's your position on that?

Rebecca: I would have to look through it to give a good answer.

Erica: What's your experience with human resources, particularly supervising staff and your approach to confrontation?

Rebecca: There's a hierarchy at town hall. If people have issues with co-workers or their supervisor, they need to sit down and hear both sides; talk with all involved. Sometimes it's a personality issue instead of a work-related issue. The last thing you want is to let someone go.

Bob: What's something you made exist?

Rebecca: Our Council on Aging was not functioning properly. I made sure they had things they were lacking and worked with them to stay on track with their mission. They came together where they overlapped with Elder Affairs – I was glad to be able to help seniors as a group or individually.

Bob: The Town Administrator is the manager/supervisor for many positions in town, for example the tax collector, treasurer, etc. How would you develop a good working relationship?

Rebecca: I would try to learn as much as I can about them; what they want to see to improve; I would have to see how things come together for a year or so before making any changes. Conway's Select Board works well together, which

makes it easy for the Town Administrator. I would like to meet with Ron for example to see what projects he has. To work in Conway seems like coming home – professionally and more important personally. Such opportunities don't come along that often. I like the pace of Franklin County.

Bob: Tom has worked on formalizing how we use given resources. What's your experience with that?

Rebecca: I have worked in places where there was no personnel policy in place. I worked on getting evaluations in place, how to determine increases; how to validate someone's increase with nothing to base it on.

Bob: What's your experience with the financial management of the town, the budget?

Rebecca: In late December, notices go out. If there's no response, I tell them they will be level-funded. I have worked with finance committees and department heads. Capital projects are tougher. I can offer opinions on alternatives when we can't fund everything at the same time. I have done it all with the goal of producing a budget that people can afford.

Phil: Do you have any questions of us?

Rebecca: What do YOU enjoy about Conway?

Erica: I moved here in 1997 and the town has always felt like home. I came from west coast having lived in Alaska and gone to school out west. Conway people like and respect each other. **Phil:** I moved here from Georgia mostly for the schools. **Bob:** I love Western Mass in general. Very few people move to Conway and then find a place to work. People come to Conway and its purposeful – not because it's where they work.

Rebecca: It's not unusual for people to have an hour commute these days, but I'm hoping that if I get the job to join everyone else. I love that we could start rolling open our doors. I would like to be able to retire from Conway and I'm not looking to make changes.

Availability: I have a 30 day clause on my contract. I would like to overlap a bit with Ross if he's available. I could be here by July 1 or sooner, but would like to get through town meeting in Clarksburg.

Bob thanked Rebecca for coming in. The interview ended at 7 p.m.

7:10 p.m.: Interview Veronique Blanchard for the position of Town Administrator

Bob asked Veronique to tell the board about herself, what she's done

Véronique: I work for MA DEP and as a municipal assistance coordinator I am the liaison for grants. Municipal assistance coordinators have been around for 25 years. We provide MVP and regional technical assistance. I review transfer stations and make price suggestions. Before that, I was salvage coordinator for the town of South Hadley. I managed contracts; RFPs, compost areas, anything to do with education. I made instructive videos. When the landfill closed, the town was faced with losing revenue. Solid waste decided to start charging. One fee was for paying to throw out bags: I found how to buy green bags. I handled messaging; budgeting. Conway has MUNIS, correct? I am a dedicated public servant – I am passionate about it. I feel I can be effective in a position of leadership – to keep what's good but bring forward new ideas and concepts.

Phil: What is your communication and management style?

Véronique: Communication is the key to getting anything done. You just can't accomplish much without it. It's important to make sure everyone involved in the process gets the right information. It should be a collaborative process. If you get a small group of people together you come up with a better solution. As for my management style it's the same thing – find out what others' needs are and make sure they're informed. I was a union rep so I'm familiar with the process. This was a new union that the employees were setting up, and the process took 4-5 years to complete. I learned a lot about negotiation - not based on what was in a contract, but from ground zero. I had to figure out how to decide salaries, etc.

Phil: What were your worst and best jobs:

Véronique: My worst was a job that I got fired from at age 15. I worked with dyslexic kids and the process at the place where I was employed was objectionable. When you're in middle management and are tasked with a job and your super doesn't understand what you're doing it's frustrating. The person doing the job usually knows best. Maybe I can come up with a better method. The best job I've had is the one I have right now. I'm self-directed – I have to produce weekly reports but I have more latitude to come up with ideas. And I work with a great crew of people.

Phil: What are some personality traits you work to improve, and what is your best characteristic:

Véronique: Things I could improve: I have too many projects. I need to sit down and plow through to get it all done. My best characteristic is that I'm a people person. I feel you can accomplish a lot by communication with those you work for and with, and with residents. I have dealt with conflicts. Being able to respect people to find out where they're at I feel is my best quality.

Phil: Why should you be selected for the position?

Véronique: I'm not leaving Conway – it's my forever home. The nature of this job for most is to go from job to job, learning more and moving up the ladder, and there's nothing wrong with that. For me because I want to make a difference here – in Conway. I have no interest in being a Town Administrator anywhere else. I'm invested in this town.

Erica: Talk about financial management: How would you approach it, not having had this role before?

Véronique: I have been responsible for \$1M budget before. I realize the importance of not making any mistakes. Dealing with grants now, one of the main things to do is to explore getting more grants. With Community One Stop the state is trying to make sure towns can access all the funds available with a streamlined process. It should be great for long-term capital planning and revitalization.

Erica: How in a small town do you find people to fill positions?

Véronique: Being on the newsletter committee, I think about how people get their information. There's an equal responsibility between residents and government to make information accessible. I thought we might do a monthly column listing select board projects since last month and then, because of limited space in the *Currents* hard copy, direct the public to the town website. We might develop a FAQ sheet to get feedback. Getting people engaged is incredibly difficult. It takes people about 8 times hearing anything to let it sink in. There's so much on peoples' plates they just don't have the time, so government need to do as much as they can – repeating helps.

Bob: The Town Academy that Tom developed – it was a 10 week educational presentation on municipal government. It would be great if it got continued. People might join committees and boards through the town academy.

Véronique: Absolutely – I would certainly continue it. Part of the issue, however, is getting people to come out for meetings. Especially now with COVID we need to figure out some way to make it a bit more condensed. When asking people for their time, it's difficult. Another problem: How do you communicate if someone doesn't go on the computer, or only communicates by phone, etc. Maybe have FCAT create a 3-minute video? Meetings should be held, but then condense the proceedings to a shortened version.

Bob: What's a favorite project or activity that you did – that you made happen?

Véronique: I'm an avid gardener. When I was between jobs some time ago, I learned to make handmade tiles and ran a business for 10 years. I'm used to taking on new challenges and figuring out how to get it done.

Bob: How would you handle budgets? Finances?

Véronique: A huge thing in South Hadley I found important was dealing with contracts. You can develop an RFP – but it's only just started. A lot of municipalities don't have people to manage the contracts. For example when I worked with trash collection management, every invoice was inaccurate. I had to make sure that I paid attention to detail. So I went to a system where every slip that came in had to match up.

Bob: What about conflict situations?

Véronique: I was dealing with a corporation, and sometimes the left and the right don't get it. But I had a good relationship with the accountant and we made it work. It's not unheard that someone tries pulling the wool over your eyes, but you have to reaffirm.

Phil: There has been confrontation in interactions between the Town Administrator and residents – and people have sometimes been just dreadful. How would you deal with vulgarities?

Véronique: I have been called every name in the book. I was actually spit at. I found you can do one of two things in confrontational situations: If a situation is so confrontational you walk away, and talk about it later. If someone insults you, you just sit them down and explain the job - why the town needs to do the job. For example, at the Transfer Station there are misconceptions going on and adamant statements being made by some. I asked them about it told them it wasn't true. That's the kind of interaction you need to have. In favor of public education, it starts with listening to them.

Bob: What's your availability?

Véronique: Leaving my present position will be bittersweet but I understand you're hiring to start July 1? I respect the woman I work for, and she knows I'm applying for this job, and that I'd be leaving by July 1. I'm a contractor, so make my own hours. I could come in and do some time ahead of time to get acclimated before July 1, but I certainly could start by July 1.

Bob: What are the advantages and disadvantages of living in the town where you work?

Véronique: The advantage of someone living in the town they work in is that you know they're invested in the town. They will have the best interest of the town at heart. I'm right in the middle of town across from Bakers so if people want to ask a quick question, I would relish that. I see that as a way to communicate, to be part of the big education picture. And sometimes to be the source to dispel myths.

Erica: What is your supervisory experience and your experience with relationship building?

Véronique: In South Hadley I was responsible for three employees including giving annual reviews; interviewing for new positions; I made recommendations to the Select Board on appointments - kind of like there it would be the same here.

There was one incident, not typical in the work situation where there was a conflict of personalities. The person had an accident in a town vehicle but had a bad attitude with her supervisors – she yelled at them and eventually had to leave.

Bob: Do you have any questions for the Select Board?

Véronique: No. Reaffirming the start date was my only question.

At 7:55 the interview concluded.

Discussion

Phil asked if the decision-making is all done in public. Tom said that was right. It includes giving reasons for the decision. Tom also encouraged all to write down their decision-making process. Bob asked if the decision would be made after the last interview tomorrow. Phil said we can at least talk about it and if not put it on the agenda for Monday night. Tom gave one caveat: When the choice is made you are just agreeing to make the offer, but you would then have to go through contract negotiations. You would say that the Select Board has decided to offer you the position and ask if the candidate intends to accept the offer. They either say yes or no, or that they need more time.

Items Not Anticipated 48 Hours in Advance of the Meeting *none*

Next Meeting: Scheduled for Thursday, April 22, at 6:00 p.m., via Zoom: further TA interviews

On a motion from Bob to adjourn, Erica said aye, Phil said aye, and Bob said aye and the vote was unanimous to adjourn.