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Final Report to the Board of Selectmen of the Town of Ashby

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Executive Summary

The Ashby Board asked the Collins Center for a proposal for assistance on a variety of topics. The final project scope of work included six items. A brief summary of the work done on each is provided here:

Revised Town organizational chart:

- Updating the organizational chart was not simply a matter of re-typing the chart.
- To verify that the chart was correct, the Center did significant research into the Town.

Analysis of and recommendations for the Town Administrator (TA) position:

- After a significant needs assessment, the Center produced a report with findings and recommendations for the Board about the position. (The report is available online.)
- Three findings/recommendations worth noting here:
 - During the absence of a TA, the Town has functioned well, but this short-term success is NOT evidence that this situation is sustainable for the long-term.
 - Faced with the choice of using the resources available for a 40-hour per week TA at the current pay rate or a part-time TA at a higher pay rate, the Center believes that the latter is the better choice.
 - In the long run, the Town will function best with a full-time TA, so the position should be allowed and encouraged to evolve back toward full-time.

Job descriptions for Town staff:

- o A number of the job descriptions were in good format and relatively accurate.
- o The Center based new descriptions on the existing ones.
- A position questionnaire was drafted and distributed to all employees.
- The Board is reviewing the job descriptions in preparation for an eventual vote.

Personnel policy booklet, including standard evaluation procedures:

- The policies in place were excellent, and only a few minor updates were proposed.
- Many new policies needed because of the number of new laws mandating policies.
- A sample standardized performance evaluation tool was presented to the Board.

Town employee comparable salary analysis:

- Slower than expected, partly due to the part-time nature of many Ashby positions.
- o The Center will forward a final report to the Town in the near future.
- Even once this data is compiled, it will NOT represent a complete picture of the overall compensation package provided to Town employees.

Basic analysis of potential cost-savings policy changes, as time permits:

The Center identified seven policy recommendations that it provided to the Board.

Additionally, to assist the Board in organizing all these projects, the Center provided the Board with a roadmap to assist with the implementation of the work. (That document is available upon request.)

Ashby has accomplished a lot even in the short time that the Center has been working with it. However, it still has a much work ahead. The good news is that the Town has some great assets. Throughout this work, Center staff have been consistently impressed with the skills and devotion to the community that they have witnessed among staff, elected officials, and citizens.

Finally, while none of these projects was an unusual undertaking for the Center, putting them all together in one package was a new approach. For that reason, the Center is compiling some general observations and recommendations that may prove useful for other communities.

I. Background

The Ashby Board of Selectmen asked the Collins Center to craft a proposal with options for assistance that the Center could provide to the Town.

Municipalities across the Commonwealth are facing the simultaneous strains of declining resources and increased service demands. Due to their size, towns like Ashby also face challenges from legal requirements to provide certain services, reliance on volunteers to perform a significant amount of work, and few economies of scale in operations.

In the Town of Ashby's (hereafter "the Town") particular case, the Town has been without a TA since the long-term incumbent of the position left Town service. The Board of Selectmen (hereafter "the Board") posted the position with the same salary level as the outgoing TA but did not feel that the responding candidates were an appropriate match for the community. It was at this point, early in 2010, that the Board decided to review the position itself and approached the Collins Center (hereafter "the Center") to seek its assistance.

Over the course of several months, Center staff met with the Board on multiple occasions to craft a project proposal that would be most useful to the Town and could be delivered by Center staff and Associates. The final project scope of work included:

- 1. Revised Town organizational chart,
- 2. Analysis of the Town Administrator position and recommendations for what it should be going forward,
- 3. Job descriptions for Town staff,
- 4. Personnel policy booklet, including standard evaluation procedures,
- 5. Town employee comparable salary analysis, and
- 6. Basic analysis of potential cost-savings policy changes, as time permits.

Individually, none of these projects was an unusual undertaking for the Center, but putting them all together in one package was a new approach. Although the Center has significant expertise performing municipal government research and services of all different types throughout the Commonwealth (and elsewhere in New England), the Center had not engaged in a community-based project of this focus and depth previously.

From the Center's perspective, both the breadth and depth of the work were significant, requiring considerable investment of Center resources but also providing the Center with the opportunity to be involved with "drilling down" in one particular community. The Center viewed this as an opportunity both to help the Town of Ashby itself and to develop materials, processes, and expertise that could be utilized in assisting other communities elsewhere across the Commonwealth.

As the Center winds up this project, it is important to look at the lessons learned from the work – both lessons particular to Ashby and lessons applicable to other communities. This report summarizes the work completed and some of the lessons that were learned during the course of it.

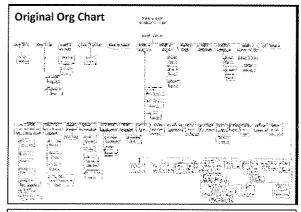
II. Work Performed

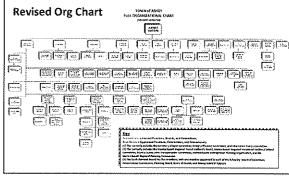
As noted, the Center was engaged to perform five specific tasks for the Town, plus a sixth, general purpose task that involved looking for potential policy recommendations, especially ones that would focus on reducing costs. As of the writing of this report, all tasks have been essentially completed, with the exception of the employee comparable salary analysis, which is nearing completion but not ready yet.

Copies of the documents fulfilling these tasks have been provided to each of the members of the Board, and a fourth copy has been given to the Town to be kept at the Town Hall. (Copies of any of these documents will be available from the Collins Center upon request.) What follows in this section are brief descriptions of the work performed and relevant related information.

1. Revised Town organizational chart: The organizational chart that the Town initially provided to the

Center provided a good deal of information, but it was hand-drawn, difficult to read, and missing some boards and officials. Updating the organizational chart was not simply a matter of re-typing the chart into a software program. Towns generally involve so many different functions and responsibilities that even smaller communities have highly complicated charts. To verify that Ashby's organizational chart was correct, the Center did significant research into the Town's organization past. This required getting information from and crosschecking various sources of information about the Town's operations (e.g., Town Report, Town Meeting votes, etc.). The Center found a variety of boards and officials that needed to be identified on the chart and engaged the Board in a lengthy discussion about a variety of related issues that arose during the discussions. For example, the Town had accepted the state statute allowing for the creation of a Development and Industrial Commission in 1968 (MGL Chapter 40, Section 8A). It existed for several years before being abandoned, and it was not referenced on the organizational chart. Additionally, the Earth





Removal Board, which has members appointed by a variety of different boards and commissions, was not included on the existing chart.

After the research, the Center presented findings and proposed changes to the Board, which was discussed over the course of several meetings. The resulting organizational chart should provide an updated picture of the organization of activities of the Town, as well as providing clarity about which positions are elected and which are appointed. The Board voted on December 6, 2010 to ask that the chart be posted on the Town's website for public comment. It will also be available in Town Hall.

Despite the work put in, the complexity of a town's operations makes it possible that something is still missing or inaccurate. If it proves that something needs to be changed, the Center will be available to update it.

Finally, during the process of this work, a second chart was provided and discussed that provided a different perspective on the Town's organization. It was eventually decided that this second chart was not needed and no final version was created.

2. Analysis of the Town Administrator position and recommendations for what it should be going forward: This piece of the work was what initially prompted the request for the Center's assistance. As noted, the Town has been without a Town Administrator since November 2009.

Over the summer, as part of a needs assessment, Center staff interviewed 25 people for this piece of the project. This included current and former elected officials, appointed officials, and residents. In addition, Center staff reviewed numerous Town documents, including annual Town Reports, budgets, the Town bylaws, Town Meeting results, and more. Center staff also collected data from the Commonwealth about Ashby's financial condition and spending decisions over the last several decades.

The Center produced a report that was presented to the Board in draft form on September 9, 2010 and then as a final report on October 14, 2010. This report, which is available on the Town website or by contacting the Collins Center, contained a series of recommendations for the Board about the position. The key findings of this report can be summarized as follows:

- During the current absence of a Town Administrator, the Town has functioned without major problems, but this short-term success is NOT evidence that this situation is sustainable for the long-term, as there are a growing number of major projects that remain unfinished and longterm work not being undertaken.
- The skills, knowledge, and experience that the Town needs most in the next Town Administrator are:
 - Strong leadership and management skills,
 - O Strong communications skills, especially the ability to foster good internal communication,
 - Knowledge of relevant Massachusetts General Laws and federal laws, particularly with regard to human resources, financial management, and procurement,
 - o Innovative thinking, particularly in improving efficiency and finding new resources,
 - Sufficient experience to identify and address potential problems preemptively,
 - Ability to be persuasive when presenting issues to the Board of Selectmen and other elected and appointed officials,
 - o Knowledge of potential grant opportunities and a successful record of obtaining them, and
 - Significant tact and political skill, particularly the ability to interact with residents and businesses, and to be a neutral arbiter between competing interests or views on an issue.
- These skills are in high demand across the state, and the market for experienced and skilled municipal managers is very competitive. Given that the Town is unlikely to obtain above characteristics at the pay rate currently offered and faced with the choice of using the resources available for a 40-hour per week Town Administrator at the current pay rate or a

- part-time Town Administrator at a higher pay rate, the Center believes that the latter is the better choice.
- The Town can function for the short and medium-term with a part-time Town Administrator, provided that staff currently handling pieces of the position's work are willing to continue with some of the responsibilities they are currently handling.
- In the long run and as described further in the report, the Town will function best with a full-time Town Administrator, so the position should allowed and encouraged to evolve back toward full-time over the course of several years. This may become a cost-neutral proposition because a highly-skilled part-time Town Administrator may have the ability to find efficiencies in Town operations to finance this, or the ability to obtain new resources like additional grant funding.

The Center concluded by recommending that the Town consider restructuring the Town Administrator position so that, for the short-term, it is part-time, has an increased hourly pay rate, and does not include some of the responsibilities currently assumed by other Town Hall staff. The Center further suggested the following steps the Board could take to implement these recommendations:

- Discuss TA & Interim Town Administrator (ITA) job descriptions
- Vote on TA recommendations
- Vote on ITA job duties
- Hire part-time ITA
- Re-write TA job description
- Re-post permanent TA position
- Re-write TA contract and hire TA
- Update Town Hall job descriptions
- Board continues active role
- Dialogue with public on changes

As of this report, the Board is considering its options with regard to the Interim Town Administrator and Town Administrator positions. It is worth reiterating that, although the Town has functioned successfully for a year in the absence of a Town Administrator, this should not be taken as evidence that this situation is desirable or tenable for the long-term.

For the most effective and efficient operations of the Town, Ashby should have a professional Town Administrator in place to assist the Board of Selectmen and the other elected officials in the running and management of Town operations.

3. Job descriptions for Town staff: The Town requested the review and creation of job descriptions for all positions. The Center began by reviewing the existing job descriptions. Because many of the existing job descriptions were in good format and relatively accurate, the Center based new descriptions on these. In order to evaluate the positions, a position questionnaire was drafted and distributed to all employees. The questionnaire included key elements of a position, such as essential functions, educational and experience requirement, supervisory responsibilities, knowledge, ability and skill requirements and physical requirements. The completed questionnaires were reviewed and compared to existing job descriptions, if any. A draft new or revised job description was created where needed and reviewed by the employees. After a review, final job descriptions were proposed. As of

this report, the Board is reviewing the job descriptions in preparation for an eventual vote to approve them.

Additionally, at the Board meeting on December 6, 2010, there was some discussion of utilizing the Town's website to provide a centralized location where residents could obtain information about the roles of the various officials, boards, and committees. Currently, the Town's "Officials" page has the job descriptions that existed prior to the start of this project, while each individual board or committee may provide information about its role and responsibilities on its own page. Putting the full set of job descriptions, once approved, onto the same page as a set of descriptions that boards and committees could provide of their own roles and responsibilities would be an easy way to centralize information about the Town's functions. This page could also include the new organizational chart.

4. Personnel policy booklet, including standard evaluation procedures: The Board requested that the Center review the personnel policies of the Town and put together a comprehensive and up-to-date personnel policy book, as well as performance evaluation procedures.

The Center was pleased to find that the policies in place were excellent. Only a few minor updates were made to the existing policies. Many new policies needed to be drafted because of the significant number of new laws mandating policies.

Additionally, a sample standardized performance evaluation tool was presented to the Board of Selectmen. The Center recommended that the evaluation system be implemented in stages, beginning with the Board of Selectmen and Town Administrator evaluating department heads.

5. Town employee comparable salary analysis: This is the last main piece of the work that still is not complete. The Center was able to get the data necessary to put together this piece, but it took longer than expected, particularly due to the unique part-time nature of many Ashby positions and its comparable communities that makes it difficult to get accurate data. The Center will forward a final report to the Town in the near future, once the data has been organized into the form suitable for use as requested by the Board.

At the meeting on December 6, 2010, the Center presented the Board with some draft information, and the Board requested some changes to the formatting that the Center is still working on pulling together. It is important to note that even once this information is compiled, the information will NOT represent a complete picture of the overall compensation package provided to Town employees, which would require a comprehensive comparison of pay and benefits, including health and other benefits, insurance premiums paid. A study such as this is outside the scope of the current project.

The information provided will give a sense of where the salary levels of Town employees stand relative to each other and other communities. Having this information will be useful in formulating the Fiscal Year 2011 budget and in ongoing dialogue about the Town's spending priorities.

6. Basic analysis of potential cost-savings policy changes, as time permits: This portion of the project was essentially included in order to give the Town and the Center the opportunity to keep an eye out for potential ideas and innovations that might benefit the Town. The idea was that as Center staff spoke with officials and reviewed documents they would make discoveries about potential

opportunities that the Board and other elected officials might have to increase the efficiency or effectiveness of Town operations.

Over the course of this project, Center staff produced seven one-page policy recommendations for the Board. These are available at Town Hall or by contacting the Collins Center. They are titled as follows:

- PR1: Legal services
- PR2: Budget process
- PR3: Capital maintenance and improvement
- PR4: Parcel research
- PR5: Bylaw review
- PR6: Revenue opportunities
- PR7: Savings opportunities

The Center believes that these are among many useful projects that the Town can and should undertake once a Town Administrator or Interim Town Administrator has been hired.

Roadmap for implementation: To assist the Board in organizing all these projects, the Center provided the Board with a roadmap to assist with the implementation of the work. This one-page document breaks down the various projects into pieces and proposes a timeline for working on each of them. A copy is available from the Collins Center upon request.

III. Ashby Moving Forward – Findings Specific to the Town

Ashby has accomplished a lot even in the short time that the Center has been working with it. However, it still has a great deal of work ahead. In addition to finding an Interim Town Administrator, should the Board decide to move in that direction, the Town will need to work on the following tasks (to select just a few):

- Finding and retaining permanent TA,
- Revisiting significant capital projects (e.g., police station, town hall, etc.),
- Having a dialogue about the regionalization study (and, if the Town so desires, pursuing the option presented),
- Finding efficiencies and additional revenue opportunities,
- Economic development opportunities,
- Additional service sharing and regionalization opportunities, and
- Structural considerations that might be addressed through the creation of a Town Charter.

These are significant tasks that the Town faces going forward, and (like most Massachusetts communities) it will face them during an era of tight and tightening budgets.

The good news is that the Town has some great assets. Throughout this work, Center staff have been consistently impressed with the skills and devotion to the community that they have witnessed among staff, elected officials, and citizens. As noted in the Town Administrator report, numerous staff and volunteers go far beyond their traditional and official roles. There is also a general culture of self-reliance in the Town that serves as a source of strength.

For all these reasons, the Town has good reason to believe that it can successfully get through this work and continue in the positive direction it is heading.

IV. General Observations and Recommendations from the Work

As noted, this project was different from many of the Center's other projects both in its breadth and its depth. For that reason, the Center has assembled a great deal of useful information that can be applied to other communities. A full report of best practices and related observations from the Ashby project will be made available on the Collins Center website at a later date.

In the meantime, there are a few items worth noting here:

- The complexity of Massachusetts town government and the number of functions that it has accumulated over the centuries means that a periodic review of a town's organizational structure can be very helpful. Even in smaller communities with strong institutional knowledge, it is worthwhile to investigate a town's structure, because there may be areas that have changed, over the years, in a way that the community does not recognize.
- Job descriptions are critical to the proper functioning of any organization. Not only do they help employees know and define their work, but they enable supervisors and the public to know expectations.
- Performance evaluation is a communication tool which enables supervisors and employees to
 discuss goals, objectives and priorities that are in concert with the job description.
 Implementing a well-designed system for performance evaluation is a worthwhile but
 challenging task. Having strong and up-to-date job descriptions is a necessary condition to
 begin this work, which also requires a significant amount of time, planning, and training.
 Communities can do it, but it must be a step the elected leadership is willing to invest
 significant time and energy in.
- Even a high-quality personnel policy book or set of personnel policies can benefit from a periodic review to ensure that it has been kept up-to-date with changing laws, expectations, and technologies. Failure to keep personnel policies up-to-date can leave a community open to a variety of missed opportunities or potential problems.
- Finally, it may be that many communities could benefit from bringing in an outside party
 periodically to provide a different perspective and potential new ideas and innovations about
 Town government operations, independent of what the issue is precipitating a request for
 assistance.