TOWN OF CHESHIRE

80 CHURCH STREET | CHESHIRE, MASSACHUSETTS 01225
PHONE (413) 743-1690 | FAX (413) 743-0389

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OFFICE OF THE BOARD OF SELECTMEN

Meeting Minutes – June 3, 2021

Members Present: Michelle Francesconi, Chair
Jason Levesque, Clerk
Shawn McGrath
Mark Biagini
Raymond Killeen

Others Present: Mark Webber, Interim Town Administrator
Noelle M Pandell, Interim Administrative Assistant
Kathleen Degnan, Candidate for Town Administrator Position
Alicia Fonash-Willett, Candidate for Town Administrator Position
Jennifer Morse, Candidate for Town Administrator Position

M. Francesconi opened the meeting at 6:31 pm.

Ms. Francesconi acknowledged the members of the Board present at the meeting.

1. Town Administrator Interviews

Ms. Francesconi announced that this meeting was to interview the candidates for the Town Administrator position. M. Francesconi said that she would ask a series of 11 questions and then the other Selectmen will have a chance to ask any follow-up questions.

The first candidate is **Kathleen Degnan**.

1. **Please tell us what kind of municipal experience you have and why you chose to pursue a career in local government?**

   K. Degnan said she was a City Solicitor and an Assistant City Solicitor. She said municipal officials are the best to work with.

2. **Can you tell us about your experience managing department heads/staff and personnel matters in general? How do you avoid micro-managing?**

   K. Degnan said that she has a small law department that consists of an Administrative Assistant and a part-time City Solicitor. She said she deals with different issues like budgeting and bonding questions. She said her favorite part was labor law and procurement. She people came to her from other departments about personnel matters to ask about what kind of discipline can be imposed and also about civil service.

A member of the Board asked specifically about how she avoids micromanaging and she responded that when different department heads come to you, you can't micromanage because they are not your staff. She said she worked well with department heads. She said that dealing with a lot of different people will help with being a Town Administrator.

A member of the Board asked if she had any experience with contract negotiations. She said when dealing with the public sector, they would attach the wrong terms and conditions to their bids. She said she would have to call them and tell them that they attached the wrong terms and conditions. She said some contracts are not governed by bid laws and she would have to call them and tell them that we cannot have our taxpayers pay for certain things.

A member of the Board asked about employee contracts. K. Degnan said that she interpreted collective bargaining agreements.

3. **How do you see yourself as a leader? What skills have you developed to be a successful town administrator/supervisor?**

K. Degnan said that if you don't respect employees, it won't work out well. She said she trusts and respects people. She said listening is important. She does this because she doesn't know everything. She said you have to be able to take other people's points of views. She also said that she provides advise on various issues.

A member of the Board said communication is important and he asked how she was with Communication. She said she has no problem picking up the phone to say hey I have a problem, or we have this project coming up, what are your thoughts. She said she agrees that communication is important, and she has no problem asking what other people think.

A Board member asked if she believed in the phrase "lead by example"? She said yes. It is important and people want to see you lead by example.

4. **What is your experience with public sector procurement if any? Have you taken any procurement classes in Massachusetts?**

K. Degnan said yes, she has taken classes in procurement in Massachusetts. She said she has a lot of experience in this area. She said she also had to go to court or to the Inspector General or to the Attorney General's office for bid protests. She also dealt with public works and also with phones, computers and computer software.

5. **Technology – please tell us about your comfort level with various Microsoft products and any other municipal software programs that you currently use?**

K. Degnan said that she is average in PowerPoint and Excel. She mostly uses Word. She said she has always had an administrative assistant to help with these.

A member of the Board asked if she had any experience using electronic meeting platforms like Go-To-Meeting. She said that she has used Zoom and WebEx, but she prefers to be in person. A member of the Board explained that technology, including the website, was part of this position and asked if she had a firm understanding of technology. K. Degnan said that she has started meetings and ran meetings. She

said she has experience with data entry. She said she could learn it because if she understands what the problem is and what the goal is, she can figure it out.

6. **As the Town Administrator, how would you go about getting information out to the residents and the business community when needed? (Both emergency and non-emergency)**

   K. Degnan said for non-emergency transparency is a big thing and she would post it online. For emergency, she said she would post it online and publish it too. She would use public media like the newspaper and also call the media. She said before doing that she would make sure she had all of the facts. She would also post in public buildings. She said if people called her, she would answer their questions unless it involved litigation. If it involved litigation, she would talk to the town attorney. She said sometimes you get angry people, and she knows not to send them away.

   A member of the Board asked if she had experience with social media. She said she has limited experience with social media. She said she does not think it is good for businesses to use Facebook. She said she uses it personally but not for business. She said Instagram is a good platform, but she doesn't use Twitter.

7. **Community partners – please tell us how you would build and maintain relationships with community partners and organizations (planning agencies, non-profits, transportation agencies, neighboring towns, etc.)**

   K. Degnan said she worked with the Berkshire Regional Planning Commission, and they were helpful. She said having Elder Services and the Red Cross as a partner can be a good source. She has worked with the United Way.

   A member of the Board asked if she had any experience with dilapidated buildings. She said yes, it is an enforcement issue. She worked with the departments to get them to enforce it. She even had to go to court sometimes. They even had to demolish structures.

8. **Why Cheshire? What about this community and this position interests you?**

   K. Degnan said that Cheshire is a small quaint town. It has 'the trail' that brings people here. She hasn't heard about a lot of crime here. She thinks it is the right size municipality. She lived in Berkshire County her whole life. There is must trouble here and she would like to do this.

   A member of the Board asked if she thought there was challenges to Cheshire being a small town. She said yes, but they are things she has dealt with before.

9. **Please tell us about your municipal finance experience if any (budget development, budget management, etc.)**

   K. Degnan said that she has prepared budgets, prepared budget forecasts, was asked bonding questions. She said jack of all traits, master of none. She also answered questions about grants.

10. **Please tell us about your experience with municipal grants. Can you provide an example of a successful grant application and implementation that you were involved in?**

K. Degnan said that she did not write any grants. She reviewed grant applications for the legality of it. She said she took grant courses at Berkshire Community College.

11. **What metrics would you use to measure the success of the Town Administrator?**

    K. Degnan said she would make sure and keep the departments we have here. If we borrowed money. If we always had free cash and then a new Town Administrator comes in and there is no more free cash.

    A member of the Board explained that the Annual Town Meeting needs to approve the Town Administrator position as a full-time position. If it the townspeople should vote a full-time position down and it remains a part-time position, would you still be interested? K. Degnan said yes.

    If it is a full-time position, how many hours do you see yourself doing in person. K. Degnan said 40-hours and weekends if needed.

    A member of the Board asked is she could separate being an attorney and being a Town Administrator because the Board would not be looking to this position for any legal advice. K. Degnan said yes. She would look at money situations.

    A member of the Board asked if she dealt with the Pittsfield public schools, and she said yes, she dealt with them.

M. Francesconi thanked K. Degnan and told her that the Board would be deliberating next week and then they would decide.

K. Degnan left the meeting. The Board then took a 5-minute break.

The second candidate is **Alicia Fonash-Willett**.

1. **Please tell us what kind of municipal experience you have and why you chose to pursue a career in local government?**

   A Fonash-Willett said she has a BA in English and Communications. She has leadership skills and she optimized operations. For 13 years, she served as Assistant Town Clerk and IT Coordinator. As IT Coordinator she has done the following:

   - Upgrade services
   - Cloud solutions
   - Cloud used as primary backup
   - Cybersecurity
   - Voiceover IP Phone System – unified seven buildings in seven locations
   - Managed IT budgets, which includes a computer budget and a 5-year capital plan working with other departments
   - WIFI added to all seven buildings and the fire trucks are WIFI enabled

   A. Fonash-Willett said that the town she works for now is similar to Cheshire including a regional school district.

2. **Can you tell us about your experience managing department heads/staff and personnel matters in general? How do you avoid micro-managing?**

   A. Fonash-Willett said she does not believe in micro-managing. She said it is important to forge relationships and have open communication with departments. She said she has experience working with boards and department heads. She works with IT vendors; she purchases computers, creates policy and makes sure networks are up. She makes sure departments have what they need, or they have discussions and make plans to get them what they need. She interacts with Town Counsel every day and she deals with people at the state level, deals with boards and commissions and also the residents. She said everything she has learned as an Assistant Town Clerk and IT Coordinator has prepared her for a Town Administrator position.

3. **How do you see yourself as a leader? What skills have you developed to be a successful town administrator/supervisor?**

   A. Fonash-Willett describe herself as encouraging, approachable, collaborative, honest and communicative. She said you cannot move forward without the above. She said she believes it is important to have an open door to get to know staff.

4. **What is your experience with public sector procurement if any? Have you taken any procurement classes in Massachusetts?**

   A. Fonash-Willett said she has not taken any procurement classes in Massachusetts because up until recently she has lived in Connecticut. She said she is certainly willing to take classes in Massachusetts.

   She said she created a computer replacement program every four-years. She said it is better to be proactive rather than reactive. Every year she puts money away for what is on the capital plan. She said she deals with procurement all the time. She said the IT vendors that she deals with is on state contract, so she doesn't have to go out to bid because they know those are the lowest prices.

5. **Technology – please tell us about your comfort level with various Microsoft products and any other municipal software programs that you currently use?**

   A. Fonash-Willett said that she is very comfortable with technology. She said she has migrated everything over to the Cloud. She is comfortable using Microsoft 365, Teams, Zoom, permitting system and SAS products. With Microsoft 365, she said she loaded it on staff computers and then held training for them. She said she hates to hear "that's the way we've always done it."

6. **As the Town Administrator, how would you go about getting information out to the residents and the business community when needed? (Both emergency and non-emergency)**

   A. Fonash-Willett said she has used Facebook, Dove Cast, website, social media, Safer Durham. She said she would stay in constant contact via the website, Facebook, send out information and a monthly newsletter

7. **Community partners – please tell us how you would build and maintain relationships with community partners and organizations (planning agencies, non-profits, transportation agencies, neighboring towns, etc.)**

A. Fonash-Willett said she would work closely with neighboring towns, closely with the school district and with state agencies and social services. She said we all need to communicate together to show we are all on the same page; this is the advantage of a small town.

8. **Why Cheshire? What about this community and this position interests you?**

   A. Fonash-Willett said that as of the end of July, she will be a full-time resident of Cheshire. She said this is the perfect time to move to Cheshire. She said she thinks she can make a big difference in the way the town serves our residents.

9. **Please tell us about your municipal finance experience if any (budget development, budget management, etc.)**

   A. Fonash-Willett said that she manages an IT budget that is $125K and a computer budget that is between $4-10K and a 5-year capital budget. She said she has a great relationship with the Finance Director, Board of Selectmen and Board of Finance. She said the school district budget is separate and is $39M. She said she wasn't sure what the Town of Durham's share was, but she could get that information. She also said the Town of Durham has 25-30 full-time employees and a volunteer fire department and a volunteer ambulance service.

10. **Please tell us about your experience with municipal grants. Can you provide an example of a successful grant application and implementation that you were involved in?**

    A. Fonash-Willett said she is not a grant writer, but she does work closely with the Finance Director with grants, and she is always looking for grant opportunities.

11. **What metrics would you use to measure the success of the Town Administrator?**

    A. Fonash-Willett said she thinks the residents would be the metrics as we are here to serve the residents and to support residents.

    A member of the Board explained that the Annual Town Meeting needs to approve the Town Administrator position as a full-time position. If it the townspeople should vote a full-time position down and it remains a part-time position, would you still be interested? A. Fonash-Willett said that she thinks it would be a disservice to the Town if the position was reduced to part-time. She said the Board of Selectmen needs the support of a full-time Town Administrator. She said to answer your question, I would not take my resume out of the running.

    If it is a full-time position, how many hours do you see yourself doing in person. A. Fonash-Willett said 40-hours but it's always more than 40-hours. She said she is always connected.

    A. Fonash-Willett noted that the Massachusetts municipal governance is very similar to Connecticut's but there may be a learning curve. As a parting comment, A. Fonash-Willett said she is very excited, and she thinks her skills will transfer nicely.

M. Francesconi thanked A. Fonash-Willett and told her that the Board would be deliberating next week and then they would decide.

A. Fonash-Willett left the meeting. The Board then took a 5-minute break.

The third candidate is **Jennifer Morse**.

1. **Please tell us what kind of municipal experience you have and why you chose to pursue a career in local government?**

   J. Morse said she started as the Town Clerk then she ran for the Board of Health and then the Board of Selectmen with the Town of Rowe and then she was Assistant Assessor and then Town Administrator for the Town of Ashfield. She said the Town of Ashfield has a $5M budget and two enterprise funds. The population is 1600 and mainly elderly. She said they are part of the Mohawk Trail Regional School District and the Town's share is about 50% of the town budget.

2. **Can you tell us about your experience managing department heads/staff and personnel matters in general? How do you avoid micro-managing?**

   J. Morse said a town needs solid department heads. She said she does not micro-manage. She helps the department heads to run their departments.

3. **How do you see yourself as a leader? What skills have you developed to be a successful town administrator/supervisor?**

   J. Morse said that she struggles with personnel and HR issues; it is not her strong suit. Her strong suit is community.

   A member of the Board asked about communication. She said that working in the Assessor's Office prepared her to communicate with people because they would get angry residents that came in about their assessments. She said she does mostly verbal communication and does not write a lot of memos. She said it is a struggle to get to know the community.

   She said she became a Town Administrator when the pandemic hit.

4. **What is your experience with public sector procurement if any? Have you taken any procurement classes in Massachusetts?**

   J. Morse said yes, she did take procurement classes in Massachusetts. She said she has worked with and written RFPs. She said for things under $10K they would call around and get the best price. For things that cost between $10K and $15K, they would get three bids and take the best one and anything over $15K they would do RFPs.

5. **Technology – please tell us about your comfort level with various Microsoft products and any other municipal software programs that you currently use?**

   J. Morse said she has worked with Word, Excel and PowerPoint so she is familiar with the Microsoft suite. She also uses databases. She said the Town of Ashfield does its budgets in Excel. They also use Vadar. The Town contracts out for its accounting work. She said she could figure out Go-To-Meeting and she has set up Zoom meetings. She said she cannot do anything too fancy with computers, but she can hook them up. She said she has used Microsoft 365.

A member of the Board asked if she had asset management responsibilities. She said she has a list of everything and their consultant, Northeast IT, keeps a list on a 5-year plan.

6. **As the Town Administrator, how would you go about getting information out to the residents and the business community when needed? (Both emergency and non-emergency)**

   J. Morse said they have a full town resident list and there is a senior citizen list that they use to call residents. They also use Blackboard Connect, MailChimp and newsletter/paper.

7. **Community partners – please tell us how you would build and maintain relationships with community partners and organizations (planning agencies, non-profits, transportation agencies, neighboring towns, etc.)**
   J. Morse said she would get to know everyone. She said she has no fear reaching out to people.

8. **Why Cheshire? What about this community and this position interests you?**

   J. Morse said that this is a great opportunity for her. She's been in one community for 11-years but she's ready for something new

9. **Please tell us about your municipal finance experience if any (budget development, budget management, etc.)**

   J. Morse said that the Town of Ashfield has quarterly tax bills. They start their budget in October and she meets with the Finance Committee every other week during that time. They start with the capital budget. The budgets are in Excel. She said working in the Assessor's Office helped her get to know the fundamentals of the budget process. She said the Board of Selectmen vote on the budget, but the Finance Committee is very involved.

10. **Please tell us about your experience with municipal grants. Can you provide an example of a successful grant application and implementation that you were involved in?**

    J. Morse said she has experience in grant writing. She wrote a small bridge grant and received $500K and then she applied for an infrastructure grant and received another $500K for the same bridge. She also wrote grants for CPAS. She said she is submitting three grants tomorrow. She is applying for two infrastructure projects. She said if it is a reimbursement grant, she makes sure everyone follows through and makes sure that the accountant knows about the grant. She said she also created a grant tracking form.

11. **What metrics would you use to measure the success of the Town Administrator?**

    J. Morse said that she didn't know but she thought people's smiles and them saying thank you; recognition from the community.

    A member of the Board asked if travel would be a problem. J. Morse said it took 40-minutes to get to Cheshire, but it does not bother her to travel.

    A member of the Board explained that the Annual Town Meeting needs to approve the Town Administrator position as a full-time position. If it the townspeople should vote a full-time position down

and it remains a part-time position, would you still be interested? J. Morse said no she would not be interested in a part-time position.

A member of the Board asked if she had any experience with contract negotiations and union negotiations. J. Morse said yes to contract negotiations, but they don't have any unions. They just have agreement letters for a employees and job descriptions for all employees. She said she attended the MMA HR Bootcamp and the first thing they stressed was the need for job descriptions.

A member of the board asked if she were to get the position when she would be able to start. J. Morse said probably July 1st because she would like to give a good notice to the Town of Ashfield and then offer some assistance after that.

M. Francesconi thanked J. Morse and told her that the Board would be deliberating next week and then they would decide.

2. **Any Other Business Not Reasonably Anticipated 48-hours Prior to the Meeting -** none

3. **Adjournment** – *M. Biagini made a motion to adjourn the meeting at 8:57 pm – seconded by J. Levesque –* ***Roll Call Vote – All members yes –*** *Motion carried*

Respectfully submitted,
Noelle M. Pandell