

Draft Report on the Ashby Town Administrator Position

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Executive Summary

At the request of the Ashby Board of Selectmen, the Collins Center researched the Town Administrator position and analyzed options for possible changes to it that could improve the effectiveness and efficiency of Town government. The full report provides a summary of that research, the options reviewed, and the recommendations the Center is making, as well as the methodology used and the principles underpinning the work.

The key findings of this report are 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 long-term 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,
 - 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,
 - 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,
 - 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 be 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 recommends 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.

1. Background

About the Research

The Ashby Board of Selectmen (hereafter “the Board”) retained the Collins Center (hereafter “the Center”) to research Ashby’s Town Administrator (hereafter “TA”) position and issue recommendations for the structure, role, and responsibilities of the position. This report summarizes the results of that research and includes the Center’s recommendations on these subjects.

Municipalities across the Commonwealth are facing the simultaneous strains of declining resources and increased service demands.¹ Due to their size, towns like Ashby also face additional challenges from legal requirements to provide certain services, heavy reliance on volunteers, and few economies of scale in operations.

In Ashby’s particular case, the Town has been without a TA since the long-term incumbent of the position left Town service. 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 that the Board decided to review the position itself.

The Center’s research for this report took several forms:

- (1) Review of available and relevant Town documents,
- (2) Interviews with Town staff, department heads, and board and committee members,
- (3) Review of related research and reports on other communities, and
- (4) Conversations with experts in Massachusetts municipal governance in small towns.

For information about the methodology used, please see Section 4.

The Center’s research was also guided by the following principles:

- (1) Understand that every town is unique and reflect that uniqueness in the recommendations,
- (2) Obtain diverse points of view on all issues,
- (3) Focus on the Town’s current condition and future opportunities and refrain from passing judgments on past occurrences,
- (4) Make recommendations that are pragmatic, and
- (5) Make recommendations that are adaptable.

For more information about the principles followed, please see Section 5.

In order to satisfy its first principle, the Center’s research included a significant effort to understand the characteristics and context of the Town. While even a modest description of the features and characteristics of any community is beyond the scope of this report, it is useful to describe a few of the most relevant themes that became apparent in examining the operations of the Town.

About the Town

The Town of Ashby has a culture marked by a strong sense of small-town self-reliance, independence, and love of the community. For example, there is a solid core of individuals who are each serving the Town in multiple volunteer capacities. Additionally, across the Town government, officials and staff are often doing work beyond their traditional and official roles (e.g., department heads and volunteers performing basic cleaning and maintenance).

The Town's culture of independence is also reflected in a large portion of the community who like the Town because its geography and culture allow for a significant level of privacy. They prefer to leave the Town's governance to others and to be allowed to manage their affairs with little daily interaction with government. These preferences are reflected in support for a minimalist approach to most issues of Town government and its funding.

There is also a small but growing group in Town with a strong preference for conservation and preservation, who want a more active role for Town government in this and other issues. Although their preferences may at times align with those favoring a minimalist approach, it is likely that there may be more occasions in the future where these two groups oppose each other on issues of Town governance.

Additionally, several events from the Town's recent past continue to have a significant impact on the collective memory of the Town and debates about its future. First, in the mid-nineties, the Town of Ashby was on the verge of fiscal insolvency.² While the Town has built up a stabilization fund of almost \$500,000 since that time (over 8% of the value of the operating budget),³ the memory of the financial crisis remains and impacts the public discourse. Second, three years ago, there were problems with the procurement of a fire apparatus. The Town ended up making a partial payment for an apparatus that it never received. This memory seems to have the simultaneous effects of making some residents want a greater role for more professional management in Town government and others want to spend less on local government. Third, the evolution of the Town's annual budget process in recent years has caused disputes over what the desired process is and what role various officials, boards, and committees ought to play in it. The aggregate effect of these events, among others, has been an increase in mistrust in local government and an increase in the factionalization of the Town.

The Center believes that these events provide valuable information about the skill sets that any new TA should have. (The Center will be making recommendations regarding the budget process in a separate policy memo.) This history also means that the new TA is initially going to need the full support of the Town's elected and appointed officials if he or she is going to be able to effectively serve the community and rebuild trust within the Town.

There is one final important piece of background about the Town from the Center's research that should be noted here. The Town staff encountered during the research were competent, highly dedicated to their work, and strongly committed to the Town of Ashby. The Town's current workforce is a tremendous asset to the Town. It has been through their hard work (along with the additional work of the Board of Selectmen and other boards and committees) that the Town has been able to

function for eight months in the absence of a TA. As stated earlier, however, this should NOT be taken as evidence that the Town can continue without a TA for the long term, but rather an indication that the Town's employees have served the community well in this period of transition.

About the Larger Municipal Government Context

In addition to the understanding of the Town that the Center sought to develop, it is important to state the Center's perspective on the larger context of municipal government, because this has an effect on the benefits and risks to various options considered.

First and foremost, the Center believes that the overarching trend in municipal governance is one of increasing complexity. The extraordinary number of new personnel-related laws that has been passed over the last few decades, combined with a litigious culture and a growing body of case law, means that both the difficulty and the risks in managing employees have increased dramatically. The same could be said of the legal demands of financial management and procurement.

Beyond the increase in legal complexity, the fiscal situation faced by municipal government has been growing increasingly challenging and will continue in this direction for the foreseeable future. On the revenue side, it appears that State Aid growth will remain constrained for some time to come, and there is little sign of any increase in commercial or residential property construction. On the expenditure side, with health care cost inflation running perpetually well above the 2.5% cap on property tax increases (in the context of declining State Aid), health care costs seem likely to consume an ever-increasing share of municipal budgets. In short, without major policy changes at the state level or a sudden and dramatic improvement in the economy, the difficulties in funding critical services will continue, putting pressure on towns to find new and creative ways to maximize resources and deliver services.

In response to these difficulties, the general direction of local governance across the state is toward professionalization of municipal management and toward sharing services and regionalization. The latter has already touched Ashby in several forms, including the recent study on the possible regionalization of the Police Department with the Town of Townsend. The Center has not taken a position on this particular study, but it is important to note that it comes in a context of increasing regional efforts, and that these approaches appear likely to multiply over the coming years.

Finally, changes in technology will continue to impact how local government does business. Citizens are going to expect the ability to conduct more transactions securely online, new tools will become available for providing services, and managers will face increasing choices for technology purchases.

2. General Discussion of Options Reviewed

In developing options for the TA position, the Center researched the skills, functions, and qualifications that are most important for the position in Ashby, and the possible structure of the position in the short- and medium-terms.

Although the Center recognizes that there are certain core skills that every TA (or other municipal chief executive) ought to have, every municipality is unique. As such, some communities need their chief executive officers to focus more in certain areas and less in others. The research into the needs for the position in Ashby led to the following list of most critical skills, functions, and qualifications:

- Strong leadership and management skills,
- 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,
- 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,
- 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.

While there are many different ways that the TA position could be restructured, they generally fall into four broad categories of direction. The following section examines the benefits and drawbacks of each of the four potential directions.

Option	Direction	Hours	Pay Rate	Net Effect on TA Budget
1	Make no changes	Unchanged	Unchanged	None
2	Reduce position's scope	Decreased	Unchanged	Decrease
3	Increase position's scope	Unchanged	Increased	Increase
4	Strengthen position, but narrow focus	Decreased	Increased	None/Minimal

Note: "Net Effect on TA Budget" refers to the direct impact of this position on the Town's budget. It does not include any savings or revenues that a TA with high-level skill sets might bring to the Town.

Option 1: No changes to the position

The first possibility to be considered was to maintain the status quo. It is certainly the case that Ashby has functioned for a decade or so without major catastrophe. Problems have occurred, and some citizens may feel that one or two of those problems have approached the level of catastrophe.⁴ Nevertheless, the Town has built up a substantial stabilization fund, has not experienced significant legal problems, and remains a safe place to live and work. For those reasons, the instinct not to rock the boat may seem attractive.

Unfortunately, the Board itself discovered that this option is unlikely to be workable. The initial attempts to fill the TA position as it currently exists were unsuccessful, primarily because the salary level offered was not commensurate with comparable positions requiring similar qualifications.⁵ Given the continued difficulties in the job market, it might be possible that reposting the existing position could generate a better pool of candidates. Yet this seems doubtful given the Center's experience, and it may be unwise to plan for the future based upon this hope. There was also a suggestion made during the research about reframing the position to attract recent graduate school

graduates, but hiring such a candidate misses the chance to obtain the skills that the research indicated were important in the next TA.⁶

Beyond the difficulty of a successful search with the current TA position, there is reason to question whether the status quo is the optimal set-up. During the research in Ashby, it became clear that the current Town Hall staff has a substantial amount of knowledge and skill. This was evident both from the interviews conducted and in the fact that the Town has functioned without a TA since November. Town staff (along with Board members) have performed many of the duties of the TA since the position went vacant and could conceivably continue to do so going forward. Continuing this arrangement or simply returning to the prior one ignores the fact that more efficient structures may be possible, given the skills available among other staff. At the same time, maintaining the status quo would be missing an opportunity to obtain critical new skill sets that the research for this project indicated the Town needs.

Finally, as noted previously, the Center believes strongly that the environment in which municipalities operate has been changing significantly in recent years and will continue to change for the foreseeable future. In particular, municipal management is becoming increasingly complex, with more state and federal statutes affecting municipalities every year, long-term budget challenges for cities and towns everywhere, a growing trend toward regionalized services across the state (and nation), and a rapidly-changing technological and economic environment. Continuing with the current structure misses a chance to put Ashby in a stronger position to deal with these challenges.

Option 2: Reduce position's scope

The second possibility follows from the observation that the Town has managed to function for eight months in the absence of a TA. As noted previously, Town staff and Board members have demonstrated the willingness and ability to perform many of the TA's tasks. That being the case, perhaps Ashby needs only a part-time TA at the current pay level or perhaps none at all. There are towns across the state that have Executive Secretaries or Administrative Assistants to their Boards of Selectmen.⁷ Moving in that direction would reduce the cost of the position and fits with the Town's self-reliant characteristics.

Yet there are significant problems with this approach. First, although the Town is managing to function in the absence of the TA, there was a feeling among interviewees that it was not necessarily moving forward during this time. There are numerous long-term projects that have been on hold but will eventually need to be undertaken.⁸ These require the leadership and oversight of a TA. There was also a frequently-mentioned concern that the Town's temporary situation would be dangerous in the event of a major problem or emergency. Put simply, the Town's short-term success in the absence of a TA should not be taken as evidence that no TA is required in the long run. Moreover, even if it could work, it is not clear that staff and Board members would be willing and able to continue their currently-expanded roles indefinitely.

Second, the research conducted in Ashby suggests that several of the most desired skills and responsibilities for the new TA position would be lost by a reduction of the position's overall scope. In particular, knowledge of grant opportunities, strong knowledge of the Massachusetts General Laws

applicable to municipalities, and general management and leadership skills were all cited among the most desired components of the TA position. Reducing the scope of the position would be directly contrary to what the research implies the Town needs most.

Third, while reducing the TA position's hours in whole or in part would initially save money, over time the net effect is less predictable. An experienced TA can make a huge difference in getting grants for the Town, reducing the Town's insurance liabilities, finding new and innovative ways to cut costs, monitoring and reducing spending where possible, managing important projects, and much more. For that reason, reducing the TA may be deceptive, producing an initial savings in the budget but increasing costs and reducing revenue for the Town in the long run.

Fourth, as noted previously, the Center believes that the municipal management environment is growing increasingly complicated and will require a higher level of skills and experience in the future. In fact, the trend among towns across the state is to increase professional capacity through increasing the responsibility, hours, and pay of managers.⁹ The number of communities with an Executive Secretary or Administrative Assistant to the Board has dropped substantially over time. For Ashby to reduce the position's responsibility and capacity would reduce the Town's ability to keep up with the changing municipal environment, potentially eroding the Town's financial position and long-term quality of life over time.

Option 3: Increase position's scope

Another possibility is to go in the opposite direction and expand the position's responsibility, scope, and pay as a way to improve the candidate pool. Although it would be impossible to increase the position's contractual hours beyond the current 40 hours per week, in practice this approach would probably lead to the TA working substantially beyond the stated 40 hours per week. (In the Center's experience, a majority of TAs work beyond 40 hours per week.)

This approach solves several of the problems that appeared in the previously-discussed options. First, it puts the Town in a position to seek the needed skills and experience that were revealed in the research. Second, it would dramatically boost the possibility that the Town would be able to recruit a candidate who meets the qualifications laid out for the position, because the Town would present a more competitive opportunity in the market for experienced TAs and Town Managers. Third, it puts the Town in very strong position to deal with the changing municipal management environment, better positioning it to meet the operational and other needs of the community.

The Center understands that this option is likely to be difficult to finance given the current limitations of the Town's budget. While there is a strong possibility that a highly-skilled TA could find the resources to finance the difference between the current budgeted salary and the higher amount required to attract this individual, it is unlikely that the Town can prospectively identify the resources needed to support the possibility. It would be difficult to construct an arrangement that covers the risk that the TA was not able to identify the additional resources.

Beyond the resource constraints, both the research conducted and the reality of the Town's survival for over eight months without any TA provide at least some level of evidence that an increase in scope of this kind may not be necessary. (For more on this, please see Option 4.)

Finally, Ashby is a small town with a history and culture of self-reliance and decentralized decision-making. Centralizing too much power in a full-time TA at a significantly higher pay grade and with expanded responsibilities may not fit with the Town's culture.¹⁰

Option 4: Strengthen position, but narrow focus

The final option considered is a blend of Options 2 and 3. In the course of the research, it became clear that there was a core set of skills and knowledge needed in a TA that is currently lacking and would be critical for the long-term success of the Town.

At the same time, it was also fairly clear that the amount of work that the TA position has to do could be reduced in the short or medium-term by letting existing staff continue to do some of the work that they have been doing in the absence of a TA. Put another way, the Town needs more skills in the near-future, but not necessarily the same amount of overall work from the position.

Starting with that premise, this option would entail temporarily decreasing the TA position from full-time to part-time, while at the same time increasing the hourly pay rate and adjusting the description. The new position would emphasize the skills, knowledge, and expertise that the research showed was most critical for the Town going forward. It would not include some pieces (e.g., preparing Board meeting agendas) that are being ably handled by the Administrative Assistant or other Town Hall staff.

To attract the level of expertise that this would entail, the Town would need to raise significantly the hourly pay rate of the TA. Of course, due to the decreased number of hours, this would not necessarily increase the budget for this position.

Beyond considering this arrangement from the point of view of the Town, it is important to consider whether there is a supply of individuals with the skills and expertise who are available and interested in being a TA on a part-time basis. Through the research, three possibilities for making this option work have emerged.

The first possibility is to find someone who is willing and interested in being a part-time TA in Ashby and a part-time TA in another community, essentially sharing one person across two municipalities. There are already a handful of communities in Mass with part-time TAs, although it is not clear any of them are geographically close enough to Ashby for this to be viable. However, there may be interest from nearby communities that have current full-time TAs but may be willing to consider part-time ones. There is precedent for these kinds of arrangements, in Massachusetts and currently in other states. In fact, for years there were "circuit-riding" TAs who would cover groups of small towns in western Massachusetts,¹¹ and a number of other communities are served by councils of government (COGs). While the increasing demands and changing environment of municipal governance make a

broad-based return to circuit-riders unlikely, the sharing of services is currently a growing area of interest among Massachusetts municipalities.¹²

The advantage of this arrangement is that it can provide the Town with access to an individual who has the skills and the up-to-date expertise to fill the critical needs that the Town has. One major disadvantage would involve the difficulties of scheduling and the lack of flexibility to handle emergencies that might occur. A second major disadvantage would be the lack of flexibility in increasing the hours of the TA if the money and workload made that possible and necessary, respectively.

The second possibility is to find a retired TA, Town Manager, or City Manager who is interested in staying involved in municipal governance who might be interested in a part-time position. There is precedent for this in Ashby itself, where the current interim Police Chief is a retired Chief from a larger city. There are also a good number of retired municipal managers in the state from which to draw. The advantage of this option is that it would provide someone with significant experience and credibility who can acclimate quickly to the Town and the challenges it faces. The disadvantages would include the fact that the person may not stay in office for the length of time that the Town might wish and that Massachusetts pension laws limit the number of hours that Massachusetts municipal retirees can work.

The third possibility would be to find someone with the necessary skills who might be willing to take a part-time position at the new pay grade, with the possibility of obtaining additional hours on a project-by-project basis. For example, the new TA could be contracted for 20 hours of work a week, but can add another 10 hours a week for a few months by managing a grant that he or she helps the Town obtain. This option could be ideal for a current TA or Town Manager who does not want to continue at a 40-hours-a-week pace. The advantage of this would be getting someone with the necessary skills and abilities who also has the flexibility to increase hours as necessary. The primary disadvantage of this possibility is a potentially sparse population of candidates for this kind of position, especially given the demographic characteristics of experienced municipal managers.

More broadly, all three of these possibilities share similar difficulties, including the fact that having a part-time TA means that there will be a substantial amount of time when the Town Hall is operating without the TA there and the fact that significantly increasing the pay rate to attract a TA may lead to tension among Town staff.

3. Recommendations for the TA Position and Related Issues

This purpose of the preceding section was to lay out the main pros and cons of the various options available to the Town. As should be clear, there is no problem-free solution. Nevertheless, balancing the potential benefits and drawbacks for each option, and the probability that it will be realized, the last option appears to offer the best way forward for the Town. For that reason, the Center recommends that, for the short and medium-term, the Town should move in the direction of a part-time TA position with a higher pay grade and focused responsibilities.

Specific Recommendations

- 1. Re-write TA job description:** The revised job description should reflect the results of the research on the skills and knowledge most critical for this position, as well as the new part-time status of the position and the new pay rate. The description should make reference to the opportunity for the position to grow back to full-time, as the need and opportunity arise.
- 2. Increase TA pay rate:** The Town should increase the salary range of the TA position. The current salary breaks down to an hourly rate of about \$25. In order to attract candidates who would have the skills and qualifications the Town is seeking, the Center recommends setting a salary range that goes from \$25 to \$35 an hour. Depending upon the final rate negotiated, this would allow the Town to obtain between 20 and 30 hours per week of work from the part-time TA within the current amount budgeted for the position.
- 3. Hire interim part-time TA at new hourly rate:** Having an interim TA will be useful both in getting the annual budget process underway and providing the Board with a sense of how the new arrangement is working. The Collins Center can assist the Town in obtaining an interim TA while the Board restarts the search process for the new TA, either by helping locate suitable candidates or by providing an individual as a consultant to fill the role.
- 4. Re-post TA position with new description and pay rate:** Once the job description has been re-written to reflect the new information, the job should be re-posted with Massachusetts Municipal Association, the New Hampshire Municipal Association, and the Vermont Municipal League, as well as other relevant jobs boards.
- 5. Re-write TA contract:** The TA contract should be updated to reflect all the changes previously described. In addition, the contract should make specific reference to the opportunity for the position to grow beyond the base number of hours per week agreed upon, depending on the availability of revenue and the level of work.
- 6. Update Town Hall staff job descriptions to include new tasks:** As noted, Town Hall officials have provided leadership and done excellent work in the absence of a TA in assisting the Board and operating the Town. Many have taken on additional work. At the Board's request, the Collins Center is currently working on updating the job descriptions of all Town staff. The Center can, if the Board requests, explicitly identify all additional tasks that staff have performed due to the absence of a TA and will include those that are likely to continue due to the part-time nature of the new TA position.
- 7. Have Board continue to play active role:** Even after the new TA position has been restructured and filled, the Board should be prepared to maintain the more active role that it has played during the TA's absence and that previous Boards have played when it was needed. This is due both to the part-time nature of the position and to the number of large projects that have been on hold in the absence of the TA.
- 8. Educate the public on the need for the changes:** Finally, the Board should present the new TA position and new person as an opportunity for a fresh start for Town governance. The Board and other officials may wish to use this opportunity to reach out and educate the public on what the Town government does and the challenges facing it. Given the general distrust in government at all levels, it is important that the residents of the Town have the opportunity to hear from their local leaders without the filter of the media, internet blogs, and other similar sources. In Ashby's particular case, the Town has a substantial list of major projects (capital, organizational, etc.) coming up in the near future. Residents will need to be informed about these so they can understand them and so they know what is going on in the Town.

Going beyond these recommendations, the Center does not intend the arrangement recommended here to be a long-term solution. There are several reasons for this. First, as noted previously, the municipal management environment is growing ever more complicated, making the part-time nature of the TA position increasingly more difficult to maintain.

Second, in the Center's experience, municipal chief executives could almost always find more useful projects to undertake. Often when towns have opted for a part-time TA, the person in the position has ended up working significantly more hours than officially recorded, leading to frustration and an increased likelihood of burnout.

Third, part of the logic for the higher pay level is to attract someone to the position who will have the skills that will lead to savings from increased efficiency, prevention of costly problems, and additional new resources for the Town (e.g., from obtaining new grants, etc.). In that way, the TA position is intended to be an investment whose return can be re-invested for further returns if desired. In other words, in the long-term the Center recommends the Town return to a full-time TA at the higher pay grade, as the Town's fiscal situation allows for it.

Finding the right person with the right skills to fill the new TA position will be critical, but the Center believes that taking the steps listed above will put the Town in a good position to meet its needs in the immediate term while planning to address its longer-term needs in the future.

4. Methodology

The research for this project falls into two general categories: (a) research on Ashby's specific situation, and (b) research on the experiences of other communities.

The Ashby research was primarily based on interviews with Town staff, elected officials, and residents. Collins Center staff interviewed 25 people for this 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 much more. Center staff also collected data from the Commonwealth about Ashby's financial condition and spending decisions over the last several decades.

As for the experiences of other communities, Center staff possesses significant municipal management experience. Staff also researched governance in Massachusetts small towns.¹³ This included several town-specific reports written by citizens groups or consultants, as well as [#] reports written by the Division of Local Services Technical Assistance Division.

5. Statement of Principles for this Project

In working on this project, the Collins Center relied on a set of principles that are spelled out explicitly here.

1. **Understand That Every Town Is Unique**. The Center does not believe there is a single solution that will work in every municipality. Every town is different, and cookie-cutter solutions do not serve the best interests of the communities that the Center serves. For that reason, the Center will examine every town on its own terms and formulate the recommendations that will make the most sense for it.
2. **Obtain Diverse Points Of View On An Issue**. The Center recognizes that there are multiple perspectives to every issue, and that the same facts can lead different people to different conclusions. In order to have the best possible understanding of the topic, the Center will make significant efforts to obtain all points of view, including those contrary to whatever the majority view seems to be. Recommendations may not provide solutions acceptable to all, but the Center will listen to all sides and take steps to understand all reasonable opposing viewpoints.
3. **Refrain From Passing Judgments On Past Occurrences**. Understanding the full context of a project requires understanding the history that led to the request for assistance. That often means being aware of past problems and issues that have occurred, which in turn frequently means hearing accusations and blame being cast. The Center believes it would be inappropriate and unproductive to pass judgments on who bears responsibility for past problems.
4. **Make Recommendations That Are Pragmatic**. Although the Center always strives to provide recommendations for the best policy alternatives available, the Center recognizes that all policy is made in a real-world political, fiscal, and cultural context. For that reason, the Center attempts to ensure that its policy recommendations can be implemented and are not simply exercises in proposing unachievable ideals.
5. **Make Recommendations That Are Adaptable**. The Center believes that the world of municipal governance is changing rapidly, due to a variety of fiscal, technological, regulatory, and other factors. For that reason, the Center attempts to provide recommendations that are flexible enough to be successful not only for the present environment, but also for whatever major changes might appear in the near future.

Endnotes

¹ This point is being repeated over and over in the media lately. For a few examples, see:

- “Local aid cuts hit staffing, services,” *Boston Globe*, July 5, 2010. Accessed 9/7/10 from: http://www.boston.com/news/local/massachusetts/articles/2010/07/05/local_aid_cuts_hit_staff_pay_services_in_cities_and_towns/
- “Local aid budget cuts proposed in Massachusetts,” *Springfield Republican*, April 14, 2010. Accessed 9/7/10 from: http://www.masslive.com/news/index.ssf/2010/04/local_aid_budget_cuts_proposed.html

² In FY94, the Town’s free cash position was -17% of its annual budget (with no stabilization fund), which was tied for worst in the state for the second half of the 1990s.

³ On December 31, 2009, the Stabilization Fund balance was \$57,640.27. Source: Ashby 2009 Annual Town Report, p. 6

⁴ In interviews most commonly-referenced issues in the Town’s past were the fire apparatus procurement issue and the library construction issue. In the case of the procurement, the Town lost about \$350,000, and in the case of the library, construction issues are still being sorted.

⁵ See Town Chief Executive Comparison Chart.

⁶ The idea was to keep the existing structure (or make only minor changes) and reframe the marketing of the position to appeal to recent graduate school graduates (e.g., MBAs, MPAs, etc.). The benefit would be finding someone energetic and skilled who would be eager to prove him/herself and willing to take the position at the current salary level. However, there are several serious drawbacks to the possibility. First, this type of candidate is missing several of the skills and qualifications that were identified in our research as most critical for the next TA. Second, the type of candidate whom this would attract would be unlikely to stay very long, meaning the Town would frequently be in the position of hiring a new person. This would be both a drain on resources and problematic for continuity and institutional knowledge.

⁷ As of 2005, there were 22 towns with Executive Secretaries, plus another 41 that had no executive position listed. “Data Show Strong Growth of Management And Administrative Positions,” Morse, Mark. *Municipal Advocate*, Vol. 22, No. 2.

⁸ A partial list of the most commonly-referenced projects includes hiring a full-time police chief, considering the Ashby-Townsend Police & Communications Regionalization Analysis, deciding what to do about the public safety building, and considering the repairs to Town Hall.

⁹ Between 1965 and 2005, the number of chief executives of Massachusetts towns with the title Town Manager went from 14 to 54 and the number of Town Administrators went from 1 to 138. Over the same period, the number of Executive Secretaries went from 17 to 22. “Data Show Strong Growth of Management And Administrative Positions,” Morse, Mark. *Municipal Advocate*, Vol. 22, No. 2.

¹⁰ It should be noted, however, that there is generally a tradeoff between decentralization and efficiency, and it may be worth the Town reevaluating whether it is at the optimal balance between the two.

¹¹ *Managing Small Towns*. 1986. MMA (Brent Wilkes, Editor). p. 16.

¹² “Report of the Regionalization Advisory Commission.” April 30, 2010. Accessed 9/7/10 from: <http://www.mass.gov/Agov3/docs/Regionalization%20Advisory%20Commission%20Report.doc>

¹³ Among the reports reviewed were citizen or consultant reports on the Towns of Bolton and North Brookfield, as well as DLS Financial Management Reviews of the following towns: Ashburnham, Gill, Holland, North Brookfield, Oakham, Provincetown, Templeton, Wales, Wellfleet and Williamsburg.