

Letter to the Editor

Two New Staff Positions?

Introduction

During Feb 27's Select Board meeting, the Town Manager presented his justification for the new staff positions to handle Human Resources and Public Records Requests (PRRs). I strongly support the need for a Town to have a Human Resource officer and to meet its legal responsibility to respond to Public Record Requests, but I cannot support these positions under the current circumstances.

History/Background

In 2017, RaeAnn Palmer was our Town Manager. Susan Kelly was Truro's HR Administrator, and Cynthia Slade headed the Clerk/Treasurer/Collector of Taxes department supported by her staff of three employees. The Town's population was about 2,100, and the FY2017 Omnibus Budget was \$18,480,032 (-1.9% year-to-year growth from FY16).

Fast forward seven years to 2024. Our population has grown by over 300 residents to 2,486, much of which represents a "COVID surge" of part-time residents making Truro their primary residence. The FY24 Omnibus budget has increased by more than \$5 million to \$23,583,506 (5.91% year-to-year growth from FY23). Darrin Tangeman is Truro's Town Manager, we don't have an HR Administrator, and Elisabeth Verde is our Town Clerk, with no backup cross-trained.

Human Resources Administrator Position

In 2017, the HR Administrator retired and as town planning support activities consumed the administrative assistants' time, the HR function lost its focus. This position remains unstaffed in 2024 so essential duties have fallen to other town employees, an unsustainable management situation.

According to Assistant Town Manager Kelly Clark at the Feb 13, 2024 Budget Review meeting, an administrative assistant used to support the Human Resources (HR) function. Under the previous Town Manager, the administrative assistant *"started taking on more and more planning responsibilities and managing all of the different committees related to planning including LCP, including Walsh...so I basically have collected back all of those HR functions."* An organizational change - the loss of an HR Administrator and a shift in HR's focus from human resources to town planning support - upset the department's operation.

In September 2022, rather than filling the open HR position, the Town Manager chose to fund a new permanent position, Truro's first Communications and Marketing Coordinator, *"to improve transparency and provide information sharing on critical issues impacting our residents."* How's that working out? Judging by the sharp increase in PRRs in the past couple of years, townspeople are going to the source – our public officials, not their

spokesperson – in their effort to obtain greater transparency and information sharing from Truro’s government.

Think back to 2022 and 2023 when the Town approved two separate 2½ overrides for 8 Fire Fighters and 1 Admin Personnel for the Firefighters. At the end of FY22, none of these 2022 positions had been filled. Did the Town Manager have the proper HR support to hire these critical positions?

Assistant Town Clerk – Redundancy or PRRs Support?

In 2021, the Clerk/Treasurer/Collector of Taxes Department was restructured after Cynthia Slade retired in 2020 and Darrin Tangeman took over as Town Manager. The new Department was headed by Alex Lessin as Finance Director/ Treasurer/Collector of Taxes with support from three employees. The Clerk’s position, staffed by Kaci Fullerton (and now Elisabeth Verde), was moved under Town Manager Darrin Tangeman.

During the Budget Review Meeting on Feb 13, 2024, the Town Clerk made the case for an Assistant Town Clerk by emphasizing a need for redundancy, saying “*...90% of my job is dictated by Mass General Law... currently if I am not here, we cannot issue marriage licenses, we might not know that a report is due to the state. So, that is how you can get in trouble by not fulfilling those requests. This is the overarching motivation for this [need to hire an Assistant Town Clerk]*”. Thus, her justification for hiring an Assistant Town Clerk has nothing to do with handling PRRs.

In my opinion, the issues facing the Clerk’s office are more a function of the re-organization that occurred after Slade retired in 2020, under the previous and current Town Managers. The Clerk’s office has not been properly staffed for the critical role it provides. Select Board member Susan Areson summed it up when she said, “*cross training is really essential when you have a small staff.*”

Public Records Requests – Town Manager’s Hiring Metric

During the Select Board’s Feb 13 meeting, the Town Manager stated that the Town has had over 250 Public Records Requests (PRRs) with about 100 of those submitted to Truro’s Police Department. In response to Select Board member John Dundas’s questions about how many inquiries the Town Manager estimated staff could manage with current resources, the Town Manager stated: “*I’d say a significant drop off in the number of requests ... I’m not saying it has to go to zero or to two like it was, but if we can get down to some manageable level, like under 50 a year or something like that, it’s something we may be able to absorb.*” This exchange clearly captured the Town Manager’s metric for justifying a permanent PRR staff position.

It is my opinion that there is NO correlation between the number of PRRs and a need to hire a staff member to handle them. The Police Department seems capable of handling twice the 50-PRRs metric with its current staff while keeping Truro safe.

Conclusion

To me, the hiring of a Communications and Marketing Coordinator says it all. I cannot see putting that need above an HR person or an Assistant Town Clerk. Does a town of 2,400 people really need a Communications and Marketing Coordinator when we already have a Town Manager and an Assistant Town Manager?

So, here we are, Voters are presented with another crisis to solve. Let's not waste this opportunity: say NO to the requested positions and DEMAND full staff accounting. If we must hire these critical positions, DEMAND a staffing Freeze. No new employees are to be hired when a position becomes open.

— Michael Forgione