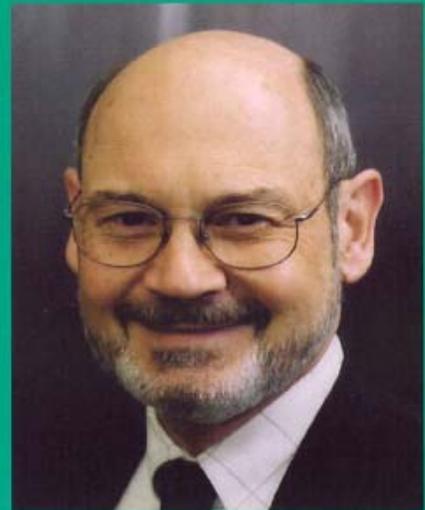


A VETERAN TOWN MANAGER *Reflects on Career in Local Government*

By BARRY DEL CASTILHO



I couldn't have been more fortunate in my first job out of graduate school, landing in Durham, North Carolina, in 1962. The city hired one or two new MPAs each year, mostly from the University of North Carolina, demonstrating a dedication to professional manager career development. They started me in the budget office, which was perfect. Where better to get an overview of municipal services and the money issues that make the world go 'round? I was promoted to assistant budget director and then had an opportunity to become assistant city manager under a great mentor, I. Harding Hughes Jr.—more experience that was ideal for a professional management career. I gained the confidence of Hughes and department heads by anticipating how he would respond to a given question or situation and by knowing when he should be consulted to make his own response. He had the uncanny ability to look at a proposal that had been worked on for weeks by a department head (or me) and find its weak spot in a matter of minutes, something I managed to learn from him.

Partly because of that confidence, but mostly because of a bizarre series of

circumstances, I became public safety director in that city of 100,000 at the age of twenty-nine. I was the civilian head of a consolidated police and fire operation of 420 employees (most trained to be both police officers and firefighters—public safety officers), even though I had never before supervised a single employee. This position added the following to my experience: police, fire,

“Two years later, I saw an ad in the ICMA Newsletter for the Amherst town manager position and said, That's the job I've been looking for.”

personnel, civil rights, a pressure-cooker political situation, and lessons on how not to manage learned under a new and truly unprofessional city manager. Perhaps most important for my future perspective, I had the experience of managing an operating department that actually attempts to deliver services every day in spite of the red tape and interference imposed by budget, personnel and management types. I also had an additional temporary assignment as the city's first affirmative action officer.

(Neither the “good ole boys” nor the very strong black community were thrilled that a guy from New Jersey was charting that particular course.)

But after more than three years, I had to get out of public safety, lest I stray too far from the municipal manager career path I had chosen. I slipped back into an assistant city manager position and was there to be appointed city manager the same night that my boss was forced to resign. Unbelievable, at thirty-two. But I was personally uncomfortable in the South and warned the city council that I probably would not stay for long. Two years later, I saw an ad in the ICMA Newsletter for the Amherst town manager position and said, That's the job I've been looking for.

At the end of my job interview, the Amherst Select Board asked if I had any questions for them. I had two. One was whether the department heads were good, because I didn't want to get into a situation where I had to clean house. They gave me a resounding yes, with one qualification, and they were right on both counts. (The one problem was gone within a year.) The other question was whether town meeting worked. Their response was yes, most of the time, and they were right. Since I was coming from a city, they were afraid that I would use Amherst as a stepping stone, so I promised to stay at least three years, probably five.

Barry Del Castilho, town manager in Amherst for the past twenty-three years, plans to retire in March 2006. He also worked for ten years in Durham, North Carolina.

THE NEXT STEP

There was so much that was completely and utterly new for me in Amherst: town meeting, mystifying Massachusetts finances, collective bargaining (which was illegal in North Carolina), some municipal departments that were county functions in the South, and the University of Massachusetts campus. (Durham has Duke University, but it's not really a "college town.") But I had little difficulty because of great support from the board and department heads. And town meeting generally worked well. If it rejected one

of my recommendations, I usually felt that either I hadn't done my job well enough, or town meeting members simply had a different point of view as elected legislators. I also found the press to be much more informative and much less sensational than the competing morning and afternoon papers were in Durham.

It appeared, fortunately, that I was a good match for the job and the community: unabashedly liberal, a good listener (there was lots and lots of talk to listen to), and a collaborative rather than authoritarian manager. With plenty of bumps along the way, the Select Board, department heads and I seemed to manage the town in partnership with one another, and in a relatively healthy tension with town meeting. "My" board members and "my" employees were really the best (and it helped that local aid poured into Amherst for my first eight years there).

The fiscal crisis of the early 1990s was not fun. Except for griches, most of us are in this business—whether we're elected, appointed, volunteer or paid—to provide services. We're not into cuts. But cut we did, and we laid off good employees, and we denied others pay increases. We got through it, and the local aid poured in again. The new millennium brought another, worse fiscal crisis, and we're getting through it, having learned some lessons from the previous one.



Amherst Town Hall

Locally, a police station and a parking garage were built and the nineteenth-century town hall was restored. Proposed charters—never proposing to do away with a "strong manager"—failed twice. Voters favored the messy but traditional and highly participative town meeting

"One thing I took from my pastoral counseling training in seminary was the skill of active listening: listening to understand and appreciate what people are saying..."

over a more "efficient" council. But those who tended to oppose the Select Board and me elected a new Select Board—a political upheaval of sorts that is not uncommon and probably as cyclical as economic ups and downs. I needed to demonstrate my respect for their changes in policies and procedures, and I needed to earn their respect as a

professional administrator who is responsible to them while maintaining professional standards.

I'm not really able to set any lofty goals for my last six months, because I'm very busy helping the new Board make the changes that they want to make. I guess what I'm saying is that huge issues (e.g., parking garages, charter proposals) come and go, but it's the long-run, big-picture that counts (primarily a professional staff that provides quality services). Easy for me to say after twenty-three years in a great community with lots of support.

I do recommend maintaining the highest possible

respect for elected officials, no matter what we may think of particular individuals, decisions or behaviors. That's democracy. We managers are given a certain amount of authority by elected officials (in charters, I mean), and the rest is up to the people who are elected by the people.

I also recommend giving your best to and expecting the best from employees, because I think they'll then give you their best, and that's good for you and your community. My mentor, Harding Hughes, taught me that my job is to help department heads help employees to do their jobs, because they're the ones that actually deliver the services.

Public service in local government became my alternative "calling" after an unsuccessful year at Princeton Theological Seminary, partly because I was aware of the high regard that people had for my hometown manager. One thing I took from my pastoral counseling training in seminary was the skill of active listening: listening to understand and appreciate what people are saying, including their body language, rather than formulating responses in your mind while half listening. It's something that people seem to perceive and to greatly appreciate. It's probably the single most important element of whatever degree of success I've had (and of survival in two very challenging municipalities). ❁

Reprinted by permission of the Massachusetts Municipal Association

TOWN MANAGER

Fiscal Year 2006

“Rotating” Select Board chairs and vice-chairs and a town manager selection process were only two of the things that made FY 06 unlike any year in recent memory. What was generally considered and referred to as the “new” Select Board embarked on a whole series of changes and initiatives.

The summer was consumed by a Select Board-supported effort to overturn by referendum Town Meeting’s continuing support of improved athletic fields at Plum Brook, the Select Board-initiated consideration of possible municipal uses for the Hope Church land, an effort by two Select Board members to accelerate changes in Flood Prone Conservancy zoning, and Town Manager-initiated union negotiations to address serious employee health insurance funding shortfalls. Only the latter succeeded, and that after many difficult months.

The financial difficulties of the previous year threatened to continue, at least for FY 07, prompting an informal strategy session of Town, School and Library officials in the summer and the establishment of a semi-official Joint Financial Planning Group in the fall, something which the Town Manager had been urging for years. It was patterned after the highly successful Joint Capital Planning Committee, initiated by former Select Board Chair Bryan Harvey in 1992, and its success would depend on the development of the same collaborative spirit that had characterized the JCPC for many years.

The town manager recruitment and selection process also began in the summer, with guidance from the retiring town manager. It was designed to include significant citizen input and to conclude in time for the new town manager to succeed the retiring town manager before the conclusion of the budget process and before the beginning of the Annual Town Meeting.

While the FY 07 budget process promised to be extremely difficult, the final budget recommendations of the retiring town manager contained several messages. The following is an excerpt from the letter of transmittal:

“Section 5.1 of the Amherst Town Government Act requires the town manager to submit a budget ‘showing specifically the amount recommended to be provided for each fund and department.’ Especially in my final budget proposal, it is tempting to show the amount that I really recommend to be provided for each fund and department. The comments under ‘Unfunded Recommendations’ on many of the budget pages allow me to articulate other needs which cannot realistically be recommend[ed] for funding in FY 07 due to financial constraints. On the other hand, at this stage of the budget process, I will not fail to submit a budget showing amounts recommended to be provided for each fund and department that will allow departments to continue to provide the current level of services to Amherst citizens through the continued extraordinary efforts of dedicated Town employees, until needs for additional resources can be met.”

While virtually all departments could better serve the citizens of Amherst with additional resources, critical needs for public safety services were highlighted:

“The Amherst Fire Department’s critically high workload on many occasions and, therefore, potentially serious threats to public health and safety are being addressed through a federal grant and fee increases. The Amherst Police Department’s critically high workload on many occasions and, therefore, potentially serious threats to public safety can only be addressed through the budget. I recommend five additional police officer positions and two additional emergency dispatcher positions in the level services budget. The eighth recommended position is a custodian for the police facility.”

The budget proposals were then clearly in the hands of the Select Board, Finance Committee, Joint Financial Planning Group, Finance Director and other department heads; and the fate of Town services rested on local aid and competing demands for school funding. Town Meeting, of course, would make the final decisions.

The delay in starting construction of the Plum Brook athletic fields, caused by the referendum, combined with a particularly rainy fall to cause further delays and problems and consume more time and energy. Another complicated and time-consuming issue, but something that virtually everyone could get behind, was the preservation of the Kimball House on North East Street. Like the athletic fields, progress was made but completion was elusive.

The Personnel Board Chair, the Human Resources Director and the Town Manager labored mightily to conduct an in-house reclassification study, but the Select Board was not ready to approve the Personnel Board’s recommendations. Superintendent of Public Works Guilford Mooring, serving in Iraq for almost half of the year, was greatly missed and was in our thoughts; Water Resources Director Bob Pariseau was the very capable acting superintendent. Town Clerk Anna Maciaszek will be greatly missed; she resigned to take a position in another state, but she loyally remained in her position through the Annual Election and then assisted her office through and after Town Meeting, long after she began her new job.

As I approached the end of my 23 years, 3 months and 12 days as Amherst Town Manager, my primary message was that of high praise for the talents and efforts of a professional staff with whom I have been extremely fortunate to work and of whom I have been extremely proud. Their work, and the support of their work by volunteer elected and appointed citizens, have made Amherst’s municipal services models for other communities in the Commonwealth and beyond. Town employees deserve the strong support of Amherst’s elected officials.

The “new” Select Board chose Laurence R. Shaffer of Vernon, Connecticut, to be the new town manager. The process was delayed to the point that he would not arrive until July 1. When I left my office on March 31, 2006, I was confident that the staff and the Town would be in good hands, those of Finance Director and Interim Town Manager John Musante.

I am extremely grateful to have had the opportunity to serve the citizens of Amherst as their town manager.

Respectfully submitted,

Barry L. Del Castilho