

Draft of General Government subcommittee Recommendations (first revision)

The general government subcommittee consists of Dick Bauman, chair, Dave Sherman and Bill DeSena, with Mike McGovern serving as staff liaison. The subcommittee is assigned to review functions of the Assessing, Codes and Planning Office, the Tax Office and the Town Clerk's Office.

Overall Recommendations

- According to the Cape Elizabeth Personnel Code, "The Town Manager or the department head may at any time, as a condition precedent to the continuance of sick pay, require a doctor's certificate or other medically reliable evidence to justify the employee's continued absence from employment." The subcommittee recommends that a specific number of consecutive sick days or an aggregate number in a specific time period require medical justification of continued absence.
- The subcommittee supports the Manager's position that the Town is currently not setting aside sufficient monies to pay for the major reconstruction and replacement projects that will be required to properly maintain roads, buildings, sidewalks and other components of the Town's infrastructure. Similar concerns apply to funding that will be needed to replace HVAC systems, heavy Public Works equipment, telephone switches, etc. Accordingly, we recommend that formal policies be established requiring the Manager to:
 - prepare an annually updated capital plan similar in scope and content to the Manager's "Municipal Infrastructure Stewardship Plan FY 2011-2021" recently presented to the Town Council.
 - identify specific projects in the capital plan that will be deferred or abandoned when approved funding is insufficient to meet projected needs.
 - provide a quarterly report on the scheduling, progress and costs of the capital projects that are undertaken annually.
- The subcommittee recommends that the Town's annual budget documentation include a detailed accounting of the value of services provided by the Town to the School Department and the School Department to the Town. The accounting should also detail the amounts and purposes of any funds in the Town's budget that are designated for payment of School Department expenses.

Assessing, Codes and Planning (ACP) Recommendations

- Relatively little open land is available for development in the Town's existing residential neighborhoods and thus Cape is considered a built-out, mature suburb. In addition, information derived from interviews and demographic statistics confirms that the current slowdown in construction activity has had an impact on the workload of the ACP staff.

However, the subcommittee believes the Town's designation as a mature suburb is somewhat misleading. In fact, large tracts of open land do exist and smaller, buildable parcels are scattered throughout Town. It is reasonable to anticipate that, as the national and State economy recovers, there will be a pickup in subdivision activity and new home construction. In addition, a great many existing homes are thirty or more years old. Consequently, we expect a significant increase in remodeling projects in coming years. We also see this trend accelerating with the arrival of younger families who will move into homes now occupied by long time Cape residents.

For these reasons, the subcommittee has concluded that no immediate staffing changes are warranted.

Assessing. In the longer term, the subcommittee does foresee a potential opportunity for savings if Cape and other largely residential towns in reasonable proximity were to merge their assessment functions into a joint assessment 'team'. A multi-town assessment team could be staffed at a level that keeps its employees fully occupied meeting the assessing needs of its' participating municipalities.

Cape's share of a regional assessment team's expenses may be less than it currently spends to support its standalone assessment operation. Further, because residential assessing is done in largely the same manner from one community to another, there is no particular advantage in having a dedicated assessor working exclusively on Cape properties.

It is, therefore, the subcommittee's recommendation that Town Council authorize the Manager to take a leadership role in contacting other nearby Towns with similar residential characteristics to discuss

the regionalization idea, determine their level of interest and if sufficient interest exists, proceed with a cost - benefit analysis.

Code Enforcement. Enforcement of building codes in Cape is largely a matter of applying widely utilized construction regulations that are developed at the State or national level. To a limited extent, Cape-specific requirements, such as those expressed in our resource protection ordinance, are pertinent as well. Accordingly, it is reasonable to consider whether the code enforcement function might also be regionalized. The subcommittee does not believe regionalization would be in the Town's best interest at this time, primarily because even a modest increase in construction activity is likely to have a significant impact on the Code Enforcement Officer's workload. The subcommittee does recommend closely monitoring code enforcement activity on a continuing basis and revisiting the regionalization idea if the Code Enforcement Officer's workload remains at or near current levels.

Planning. The Planner's primary responsibility is to interpret, apply and recommend changes to the Town's comprehensive land use ordinances. These ordinances, particularly the subdivision and zoning ordinances, are the principal means by which Town government, exercises control over the physical 'character' of Cape Elizabeth. In addition, the Planner is also responsible for the local application of State mandated land use restrictions, Shoreland Zoning being one example. In addition, the Planner provides support services to the Conservation Commission, which is responsible for managing the Town's Greenbelt Trail System. Performance of the planning function requires the Planner to regularly interact with the general public, developers and property owners, the Planning Board, Council and other Town employees.

The subcommittee has not found a reason to suggest changes in the way planning services are delivered. While the Planner's current workload reflects the slowdown of development activity, the significant result has been to provide time for work that would otherwise not be done or done on less expeditious timetable. The subcommittee is also concerned that the potential availability of more open land, the need for additional affordable housing and other such land use issues will add considerably to the Planner's workload in future years.

There may be opportunities to offer the services of the Town Planner or Code Enforcement Officer to other towns that may typically contract out some of this work. For example, our Town Planner has expertise

in creating comprehensive plans and the Town could potentially reap some financial rewards by having her do this work should there be excess capacity. It may be worth having the Town Planner and Code Enforcement Officer identify those tasks that could be performed for or shared with other municipalities.

Tax Office/Town Clerk

- The subcommittee recommends development of an ongoing public information program that encourages Cape residents to use available online options for license and permit transactions. Increasing online usage will reduce the time that must otherwise be spent by administrative service employees handling mail and over the counter transactions. Now that State law permits municipalities to charge users for the cost of bank fees associated with credit and debit card transactions, the Town should also renew its consideration of allowing use of these cards for certain license and registration payments inasmuch as card transactions are not subject to the time consuming collection problems associated with traditional forms of payment.

The subcommittee is not recommending imposition of card fees for Ft. William's gift shop purchases or Community Services programs out of concern that such fees might discourage sales.

- The subcommittee has concluded that various functions of the Tax Office and Town Clerk performed manually or with older equipment and software should be evaluated to determine if current information processing technology would improve employee productivity. It might be possible to have the evaluation done on a voluntary basis by willing and knowledgeable Town residents. However, the subcommittee also suggests that this recommendation be held in abeyance pending action on the following recommendation.
- The subcommittee has concluded that a tax collection regionalization initiative, similar to the one proposed for the assessing function, should be initiated. Regional tax collection would involve creation of a centralized agency that would bill, collect and account for the property taxes of its participating municipalities. This organization could also collect excise taxes and any other taxes or fees its sponsors assigned to it.

Since local governments in general have essentially the same tax collection responsibilities, any town or city member of the Greater Portland Council of Governments is a potential candidate for inclusion in a regional tax collection 'back office'. The economies of scale that

can result from efficient utilization of personnel and deployment of advanced processing technology may generate significant savings for the municipalities it serves.

The subcommittee therefore recommends that the Manager be authorized to take a lead role in determining if other municipalities have an interest in exploring the potential benefits a regional tax collection agency.