TOWN OF WASHINGTON

ASSESSING DEPARTMENT REVIEW

JANUARY 2024

DLS
DIVISION OF LOCAL SERVICES
MA DEPARTMENT OF REVENUE

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MA DEPARTMENT OF REVENUE

Geoffrey E. Snyder
Commissioner of Revenue

Sean R. Cronin
Senior Deputy Commissioner

January 9, 2024

Select Board
Town Hall
8 Summit Hill Road
Washington, MA 01223

Dear Board Members,

I am pleased to present the enclosed report summarizing our review of the Town of Washington's assessing department. The Division of Local Services is committed to assisting municipal governments in achieving effective financial stewardship. It is my belief the implementation of the recommendations presented here will help your community become better positioned for the future.

If you have any questions regarding this report, please contact Zack Blake, Financial Management Resource Bureau Chief, at 617-626-2358 or blakez@dor.state.ma.us.

Sincerely,



Sean R. Cronin
Senior Deputy Commissioner

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INTRODUCTION

At the select board's request, the Division of Local Services (DLS) Financial Management Resource Bureau (FMRB) completed a review of the Town of Washington's assessing department. Recent personnel changes in the department prompted the select board to seek advice on ways to sustain and enhance its operational effectiveness.

For about a decade, the assessing office's success had depended heavily on the knowledge, direction, and work practices of a sole member of the board of assessors. Her unanticipated departure in early 2022 exposed a risk common to many small towns: fractured services caused by a sudden loss of deep institutional knowledge. If not for the timely availability of vendor services to fill some of the void, the department would not have been able to keep pace with all of its necessary annual tasks, including setting the tax rate, which was delayed last year and thus put the town's cash flow at risk.

Given Washington's small budget and part-time level of assessing work volume, any future department model will continue to involve substantial outsourcing. Even so, the town must always assure that it retains assessing board members who are qualified to knowledgeably oversee vendor contracts, manage motor vehicle excise activities, maintain continuity in policies and procedures, and provide responsive customer service. Furthermore, certain procedures are likely to always be done most economically in-house, such as approving exemptions, updating ownership records, processing Chapter land applications, and submitting required reports to DLS through the Gateway system.

Based on our conversations, the assessing board members seem energized to embrace a new era of supportive team dynamics, to systematically tackle new assignments, and to generally improve and modernize departmental operations. The recommendations presented here are designed to help with those pursuits, including suggestions for implementing new internal controls, enhancing interdepartmental communications, improving data collection, and assuring compliance with state regulations on Open Meeting Law and records retention.

BACKGROUND

Home to an estimated 493 residents, the Town of Washington is the twelfth smallest municipality in Massachusetts by population. The community's hilly, wooded landscape and absence of any commercial district imparts a sense of remoteness that seems at odds with its shared borders with the much larger and more developed Towns of Lee and Lenox, as well as the City of Pittsfield. Perhaps due in part to this proximity, Washington has a very low unemployment rate of 1.7%, roughly half that of Berkshire County, and a per capita income of $32,996, which is slightly higher than the $31,527 county average.

In terms of property wealth, the town's per capita equalized value (EQV) of $195,722 is 30% lower than the Berkshire County average ($281,113) but aligns closely with other small towns positioned nearby around the county's eastern edge, including those in western parts of Hampshire and Hampden Counties. For comparison purposes, below are the towns we consider to be Washington's closest peers based on socioeconomic, budgetary, and property composition factors.

Washington's Peer Towns

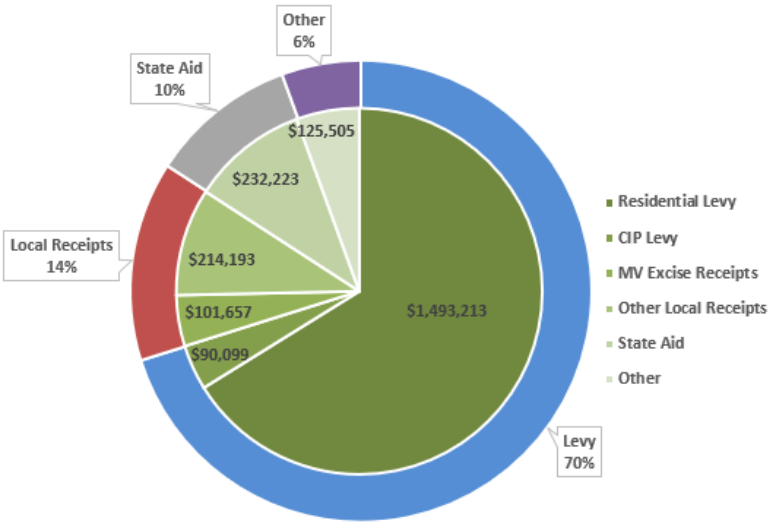
Town	County	2021 Pop.	Pop. Density	Total RE Parcels	Ratio of Resid./CIP Values	PC Income	2022 PC EQV	FY23 Op. Budget	FY23 Avg. Single-Family Tax Bill
Middlefield	HAMPSHIRE	388	16	502	90% / 10%	$26,387	$191,399	$1,852,857	$3,747
Montgomery	HAMPDEN	812	54	739	92% / 8%	$36,298	$160,420	$2,176,529	$4,262
Peru	BERKSHIRE	804	31	556	86% / 14%	$23,886	$142,097	$2,557,113	$4,056
Savoy	BERKSHIRE	645	18	499	92% / 8%	$29,941	$127,908	$2,275,813	$2,754
Windsor	BERKSHIRE	821	23	777	87% / 13%	$29,663	$170,500	$2,585,509	$2,901
Washington	**BERKSHIRE**	**493**	**13**	**743**	**94% / 6%**	**$32,996**	**$196,722**	**$2,256,890**	**$4,623**
	Averages:	694	28	615	90% / 10%	$29,235	$158,465	$2,289,564	$3,544

Underscoring the importance of the assessing department's property valuations, Washington relies heavily on the property tax levy to fund the town's budget each year, as demonstrated by its 70% contribution to the $2.2 million budget of FY2023. Notably, the taxes assessed on combined commercial, industrial, and personal (CIP) properties accounted for just 6% of the total levy, based on only seven commercial and three industrial parcels, plus 28 personal property accounts. Not only did the residential sector provide the lion's share of the total tax levy in FY2023, but all of the town's top five taxpayers were residential properties.

In addition to assuring that all properties in town are assessed at full and fair market value to provide the basis for tax levy revenues, the assessing department is responsible for appropriately committing

excises on locally registered motor vehicles (844 accounts in FY2023). In combination, these two sources represented 75% of the town's total budgeted revenues in FY2023, as illustrated in the pie chart below.

FY2023 Budget by Revenue Source



Characteristic of the region's predominantly rural environment, a significant portion of the town's taxable parcels is composed of vacant/accessory land (38%) or land under Chapter usage, i.e., forestry, agriculture, or recreation (10%). In addition, 22% of Washington's total real estate valuation comes from properties that are exempt from taxation. That figure is much higher than the average for Berkshire County (13%), as well as the state (10%). The table below shows how property in Washington compares to its peers.

Peer Group – Analysis of Property

Property Breakdown	Washington	Middlefield	Montgomery	Peru	Savoy	Windsor
Real Estate Parcels						
Exempt RE	*105*	*107*	*16*	*68*	*29*	*97*
Residential	258	192	331	391	361	465
Vacant / Accessory Land	190	141	100	283	168	212
Mixed Use	2	1	2	4	6	5
Chapter Land	39	140	64	58	19	77
Commercial	7	6	1	0	1	2
Industrial	3	1	4	3	1	16
Total Nonexempt RE Parcels	**499**	**481**	**502**	**739**	**556**	**777**
Personal Property Accounts	**28**	**53**	**47**	**12**	**87**	**11**
Property Values						
Residential	$98,173,131	$68,852,818	$112,016,500	$97,818,506	$79,140,665	$119,088,345
% of Total Value	94.31%	90.44%	91.83%	85.62%	92.23%	86.96%
Comm./Ind./PP (CIP)	$5,923,636	$7,274,891	$9,965,234	$16,423,644	$6,665,030	$17,856,466
% of Total Value	5.69%	9.56%	8.17%	14.38%	7.77%	13.04%
Total Property Valuation	**$104,096,767**	**$76,127,709**	**$121,981,734**	**$114,242,150**	**$85,805,695**	**$136,944,811**

Like most small Massachusetts towns, Washington has an elected, three-member select board that acts as its executive authority, along with an open town meeting functioning as its legislature. In the summer of 2023, the select board appointed Washington's first town administrator, a position shared with Middlefield with a 40-hour workweek split evenly between the two communities. A primary purpose of this position is to coordinate the activities of the departments appointed by the select board, which include all of the town's finance offices: accounting, treasury, collections, and assessing.

Nearly all of Washington's employees work part-time, and most have schedules that include in-person Monday evening hours at town hall. An exception is the town accountant, whose part-time hours are usually done from home. Based on our conversations, there are good working relationships among the finance officers, and their diligent efforts are appreciated by the select board.

Structure and Recent History of the Assessing Department

The three members of the board of assessors comprise the full complement of staffing for the assessing department. Until about two years ago, the board's membership was filled by two town employees and one consultant. The same two employee members are still on the board, but the third seat became unoccupied when the consultant-assessor went on leave in the early part of 2022 and then passed away in December 2022. The seat remained vacant for almost another year until the board appointed a new person, in an employee capacity, in November 2023.

One of the two ongoing employee board members, the board clerk, had been working for many years in the Middlefield and Chester assessing offices when Washington hired her about six years ago primarily to manage activities connected with motor vehicle excise. She does, however, also have some property inspection experience from her Middlefield work. The other ongoing member, the board chair, has been on the board for about a decade but for most of that time in a signatory-only role. Both employees have been receiving modest annual stipends for their part-time service.

The former consultant member had begun working for the town in 2010 after retiring from her position as Great Barrington's principal assessor. As a seasoned assessor/appraiser, she had a skillset that enabled her to perform all of the sophisticated, professional-level valuation responsibilities for Washington without the need to contract out for any additional expertise. Although the consultant-assessor was not on the town payroll, her regular weekly work hours at town hall made this an atypical "outsourced" arrangement. Furthermore, the town's budget makers aligned her compensation ($14,304 in FY2022) to be within the same range as Washington's finance officer employees (i.e., town accountant, treasurer, and collector).

Until fairly recently then, the assessing department structure was very similar to having a fully qualified, in-house assessor functioning like the department head. Although that is nowadays a rare boon for a tiny town like Washington, the situation had a distinct liability. There was broad agreement among those we spoke to that the consultant-assessor had been resolved to maintain exclusive ownership over most of the department's ongoing activities. She alone was responsible for valuing real and personal property, completing interim year adjustments, managing five-year revaluations, and generally overseeing the office's day-to-day activities. She kept her practical knowledge and ongoing procedures to herself, only presenting her recommendations to the other board members when board decisions or approvals were needed.

In light of this structure, the consultant-assessor's abrupt absence created major procedural disruptions. It also occurred during a time when the department was undergoing a conversion of its property valuation database, or computer-assisted mass appraisal (CAMA) system, from the Community Software Consortium's application to one provided by Tyler Technologies Inc. The board clerk's work experiences in Chester and Middlefield have proven quite valuable in navigating through this transitional period, especially since those other towns had already gone through the same Tyler conversions. On an ad hoc basis, she has been helping the board chair to learn the new system and also tutoring her in other assessing matters that lie within her practical experience.

But ultimately, the knowledge, skillsets, and work availability of the two ongoing board members were simply insufficient to cover all the requisite duties and activities of the office. Consequently, the town hired Mayflower Valuation Ltd. in mid-FY2023, initially as a temporary solution. Before too long, the assessing and select boards realized that there were limited options for hiring a qualified, in-house, assessor-appraiser capable of completing all necessary fieldwork, valuations, analyses, and reporting. The town therefore negotiated a service contract with Mayflower for FY2024 at a compensation equivalent to what the former consultant-assessor had received, effectively swapping one for the other though losing the town hall presence previously provided.

As another strategy to support the department in closing its knowledge gaps, during FY2023, the board chair established a mentee relationship with the Town of Lee's director of assessing. Given this person's knowledge and skills attained from 19 years of service there, including proficiency with Tyler's CAMA system, Washington was fortunate to subsequently recruit her for the third board seat.

Through the combination of hiring a final board member with advanced assessing experience and contracting for services with a qualified vendor, the town has improved the sustainability of the department's structure. The board members are now well positioned to methodically reevaluate the department's past practices for improvement potential. To support them in these aims, we offer the recommendations on the following pages.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Account for All Departmental Activities

We recommend the board of assessors ensure that there is a comprehensive assignment of responsibilities for all of the department's required activities, whether to the board as a whole, individual members, or vendors. To whatever extent that board members function in active working roles (versus oversight or signatory only), it is critical to accountability, efficiency, and effectiveness that there be no gaps in task assignments. Furthermore, a complete accounting of all the requisite statutory and administrative duties is essential not only for determining where further training may be necessary but also for making cost-benefit decisions about which tasks should be outsourced or remain in-house. To provide a starting place, we have transmitted along with this report a task matrix in an Excel workbook for the board to implement after making any additions or other revisions as warranted. Relative to this goal, we also offer the following guidance.

Work with the Vendor to Revise the Contract's Service Terms for Clarity

Our interviews and review of the Mayflower contract revealed certain textual inconsistencies, as well as some dissonance between the contract's stated services and the assessing board's expectations. For example, the contract has conflicting terms regarding the division of certain data entry tasks between the firm and assessors. Also, board members informed us that Mayflower will be conducting all inspections of real property for the town; however, the contract's scope includes no references to sales or abatement inspections. The contract must have a clearly defined scope and unambiguous service terms to enable the board to ensure complete task coverage and hold the vendor accountable for performance. We advise the select board to direct the town's legal counsel to assist the board of assessors in considering and proposing necessary contract revisions.

Assigning In-house Activities

Based on our discussions with the assessors and the current terms of the Mayflower contract, the assessors appear to retain responsibility for these main task areas:

- Personal property valuations
- Motor vehicle excise
- Qualifying Chapter land
- Mailing out and processing receipts of exemption applications, as well as all requisite annual forms, such as forms of list
- Customer service provision at town hall

- Procedural coordination with other finance departments, such as setting the annual tax rate
- Town-wide budget development activities, such as setting the new growth and overlay reserve amounts

The task areas above have subtasks to be completed as well. When adopting an activity matrix, the board members should assign primary responsibility for each listed task to a specific board member based on their interests, strengths, or experience. The goals should be to ensure complete coverage of, and awareness of specific responsibilities for, all tasks. However, the assignments can and should be flexible to provide adequate back-up and encourage mentoring and cross-training. Though many departmental duties are ongoing or repetitive during the year, others should be associated with specific annual deadlines, which leads to our next recommendation.

2. Adopt a Departmental Calendar

We recommend the board of assessors adopt a fiscal year calendar that shows when various activities should be initiated and also includes specific monthly due dates, whether they correspond with statutes, efficiency best practices, or the town's annual budget and billing cycles. With this report, we have transmitted a draft calendar as a Word document to enable revisions by the assessing board.

As a directive internal control, the calendar can help assure the department completes all necessary tasks timely and consistently even when confronted with personnel changeovers. At the start of each fiscal year, the assessing board should review and refresh the calendar with new dates or tasks for that year. As the year unfolds, the board should regularly review compliance with the monthly task lists and any deadlines. The calendar adopted for each fiscal year should be shared with the select board and finance committee to spread knowledge of the office's responsibilities. It should also be discussed within financial team meetings to enhance interdepartmental coordination.

3. Understand the Responsibilities of the Board Chair

As is common in most towns, the board chair receives a larger stipend than the other two board members in recognition of that role being assigned some additional, and usually exclusive, responsibilities. Among these are:

- Managing board meetings - The chair of any public board is expected to be responsible for running efficient and effective board meetings. As part of this, the chair must ensure meetings comply with all provisions of the state's Open Meeting Law, including agendas that are publicly posted at least 48 hours in advance. Additionally, the chair should make sure the

board's decisions are made pursuant to formal votes, that minutes are recorded for every meeting, and that the minutes of prior meetings are reviewed and approved.

- Liaison duties - The chair of a municipal board also typically acts as the liaison between the board and any external and internal parties. For example, in Washington we recommend the chair represent the department at meetings of the town's financial management team. During the annual budget season, the chair would also be called upon to attend meetings with the finance committee to discuss the department's budget request.

- Budget management - In the absence of an appointed principal assessor acting as the department head, it makes sense for the chair to have primary oversight of the department's budget management and financial transactions. These include making necessary purchases, ensuring any fees collected by the department are turned over timely to the treasurer, and maintaining the proper documents for such actions. Submissions to the accountant for payroll and expense disbursements would still be approved by all three board members, however, unless the other board members chose to delegate this authority to the chair or a different board member (M.G.L. c. 41, §§ 41 and 56).

4. Ensure Compliance with Open Meeting Law

We recommend the assessing department institute the practice of posting a weekly meeting notice in advance of each working Monday evening, and any other meeting of the board, and also follow all other related requirements of the Open Meeting Law (OML). In most medium-to-large towns, the assessing board's role is largely advisory and signatory. The board members do not participate in the assessing department's day-to-day activities, leaving those duties to be performed by an appointed principal/assistant assessor and possibly other departmental employees as well. As such, the board members would typically only serve the town by attending and participating in regularly scheduled board meetings, which must comply with OML regulations (90 CMR 29.01 - 29.11).

In very small towns, like Washington, where the assessing board members are also the operational staff, things get more complicated when it comes to OML compliance. In Washington, the three board members are scheduled to work a mutual shift in the office every Monday. If two or more of them converse about assessing matters during these shifts, even in a general manner with no decision making involved, this would qualify as "*deliberation*," which must be conducted within the context of a previously publicized meeting.[1] The website of the MA Attorney General's Office contains a wealth of guidance regarding OML, including a series of training videos. Additionally, the Office offers

[1] See OML Determination 2023-35, re: Montague Board of Assessors.

regularly scheduled webinar trainings. We encourage the assessing department to take advantage of these resources to ensure compliance with all proper meeting protocols.

5. Discontinue Using a Shared Email Account

To reduce the risk of OML violations related to electronic communications, we recommend the assessing board members discontinue the use of a single, shared email address. The OML's definition of deliberation extends to "*written communication through any medium, including electronic mail, between or among a quorum of a public body on any public business within its jurisdiction"* (M.G.L. c. 30A, § 18). If two or more assessing board members have access to the same email account to create or view emails that have been sent, received, or drafted, it has the effect of creating a board quorum.

Within Massachusetts, the practice of using a sole email address for a board or committee is not uncommon, and there are a few reasons why a town might want to do this. For one, it allows the public to contact the board without having to choose from among the individual email addresses of board members. Secondly, giving more than one person the credentials to log into the email account allows for back-up responsiveness if a board member goes on leave or separates from town service. A distinction must be noted, however, between establishing a sole email address for a board and employing an email account that is shared by more than one user. To assure compliance with OML, the number of board members that may be given log-in credentials to a single email account must be fewer than the board's quorum.[2]

Given the above, only one of Washington's assessing board members, the chair, should be able to directly access the board's email account. What many other towns in a similar circumstance do is assign an additional log-in credential to an assistant. Since the assessing department has no clerk or assistant, the town could consider giving email access to an assistant in the select board's office. Whenever the assessing board chair will be on leave, that person could monitor the account and forward any received emails to a different member of the board to respond to it.

6. Implement an Email Hosting Service with a Town Domain

Washington does not currently have a town email domain. On the advice of the town's information technology (IT) consultant, most employees and officials have established Gmail email addresses to correspond with the public and each other on town-related business, although some use their personal email addresses. We recommend that the select board direct the town administrator to seek out and implement an email hosting system that will establish a town domain and provide every

[2] See OML Determination 2020-22, re: Malden Community Preservation Committee.

employee and official with an individual email address. Doing this is necessary to properly manage the compliance risks related to OML and records retention regulations.

Per guidance from the MA Secretary of State's Office,[3] all emails that town employees and officials send or receive relating to town business are considered to be public records, and they are therefore subject to certain retention schedules depending on the nature of the correspondence. The Secretary's website provides detailed schedule information, including a database broken up by municipal department, as well as a comprehensive, downloadable .pdf version, and a web form to search for individual items.

There is a plethora of low-cost email hosting companies that the town administrator could research as part of a procurement process, and we suggest that the town work with its IT consultant to evaluate them. A good contract with a hosting vendor should include terms that ensure all messages, even those "deleted" by users, will be automatically and securely archived for the duration of the retention schedule. In addition, the contract's terms for retrieving archived messages must accord with the Secretary of State's Electronic Records Management Guidelines. The town should also adopt a policy that requires employees and officials to use the town's domain for all email correspondence related to town business. Each employee and official should also sign an acknowledgment that the policy was received and understood, and these should be kept on file with the town administrator.

7. Conduct a Records Disposition Project

We recommend the assessing department undertake a comprehensive records disposition project. Since taking over management of the office, the chair of the assessing board has been systematically identifying and assembling the various kinds of records that have been received, created, accumulated, and maintained by the department over the years. Once all these records have been inventoried, we recommend the department conduct a project to apply the appropriate retention or disposal dispositions to them in accordance with the schedule, permission forms, and procedures published by the Secretary of State's Records Management Unit (RMU).

For a variety of reasons, it is good practice to perform a records disposition project every seven years or so. Doing this not only minimizes storage issues but also improves long-term organization and efficiency by obviating the time-consuming burden of reidentifying and managing inherited paperwork when there is management turnover, as has happened here. The appropriate disposal of documents that have exceeded their required retention time frames can also produce a lean work environment that reflects positively on the town when people visit the office to conduct business.

[3] See SPR Bulletin 01-99.

The RMU's current retention schedule lists 78 distinct types of assessing department records, for which there are 16 different combinations of rules and retention time periods, ranging from less than one year (for administrative-purpose-only records) to permanent retention (for tax maps, as one example). Beyond the 78 assessing-specific records, the assessing department must also ensure the proper retention of all relevant "Records in Common" listed in the schedule (i.e., documents that can exist within any given town department, such as schedules of receipts or vendor contracts).

The department should first ensure that all documents are well secured, properly identified, and collated by type and fiscal year. Staff can then determine the retention guidelines for each record type using the search options referenced in the last recommendation. Before disposing of any public records not designated as administrative-purpose-only, the town must use the forms found here to first appoint a records liaison officer and then have that officer formally request permission to destroy the specified record(s). The town could contact the RMU for the technical assistance and trainings that it offers to municipalities, as listed below and on its website, including:

- Inventory and appraisal of records
- File management
- Selection of storage equipment
- Development of records disposal schedules (disposal plans)
- Inspection of vault and storage areas
- Analysis of record-keeping systems
- Appraisal and scheduling of records
- Implementation of schedules

8. Building Department Provide Assessors with Permits

Members of the board of assessors expressed concerns about potential lapses in the department's receipt of permits issued by the building inspector. It is crucial the assessors receive all appropriate permits to ensure they can capture all increases in property values attributable to new growth. Given the importance of this, M.G.L. c. 143, § 61 requires the building inspector to provide the assessors with all permits issued for new construction and for any substantial alteration or addition with seven days of issuance. The select board, through the town administrator, should hold the inspector accountable for the timely transmission of all relevant permits, whether that is done via emailed .pdfs or as physical copies placed in the assessing office inbox.

9. Mail Out All Data-Gathering Reports

To best assure accurate valuations, the assessing office should attempt to maximize the data collected from property owners. This is done through a set of letters, with attached response forms, that the office should mail out consistently each year and whenever there has been a property sale. It is our understanding the assessing department has lacked consistent procedures for these mailings, and, in response to a request for best practice guidance, we offer the following advice:

- Sales questionnaires - Accurate valuations depend on the assessors' ability to determine the full and fair market value of comparable sold properties. Any sale done under non-arms-length circumstances must be factored out of this analysis, and sales questionnaires can help in making these determinations. Having been told that the office does not have a sales questionnaire form, we suggest the newest assessor modify the Town of Lee's form for use in Washington. To maximize the response rate, we additionally advise the department to:
  - Mail the questionnaire with a cover letter shortly after identifying a sale has occurred, as opposed to doing it in a once-a-year batch.
  - Set a calendar prompt to mail a follow-up after 60 days of a nonresponse.
  - If there is no response after the two mailings, pursue other means to obtain the needed information, such as visiting or phoning the buyer.

- Income and expense (I&E) reports- At the start of each calendar year, the assessors should send this report to all personal property owners, using a Washington-tailored version of the template cover letter posted here on the DLS website. Among the reasons this report should go out to all relevant property owners at a consistent time each year are:
  - Taxpayers will become familiar with the timing of the routine, which will reinforce the concept that a response from them is required.
  - Since taxpayers' circumstances can change appreciably within fairly short spans of years, an annual reporting interval can help lessen the risk of unexpected, substantial variations in the returned data.

- Forms of List - Similar to the I&E reports, the assessing office should have a standard annual date to mail this form to all applicable owners of personal property. The assessors must also make sure they can properly identify all the local businesses with personal property that is not otherwise centrally valued. With the recent changeover in management, we therefore additionally advise the assessing department to:
  - Conduct a fresh analysis of the full property database to verify that no business personal property accounts have been overlooked.

- Meet with the town clerk to devise a protocol for receiving timely notices of any new businesses going forward. The town clerk is often the first local official to be apprised of these because M.G.L. c. 110, § 5 requires any individual conducting a business under a name other than their own (i.e., "doing business as") to file a certificate with the town clerk identifying the business and owner(s).

At some point in the past, the town opted to adopt a personal property exemption threshold of $10,000. Although this is the maximum level allowed under M.G.L. c. 59, § 5, clause 54, it is not an uncommon amount. Among Washington's peer towns, two of them (Peru and Windsor) have exemptions set at $10,000, while the other three (Middlefield, Montgomery, and Savoy) have no personal property exemption at all. To research the taxation options adopted by the state's 351 cities and towns, local officials can access the DLS report found here: https://www.mass.gov/info-details/local-options-data-and-reporting.[4]

10. Establish a Financial Management Team

We recommend the town establish a financial management team consisting of the town administrator, assessing board chair, town accountant, treasurer, and collector. In May 2021, FMRB provided the select board with a draft policy outlining a similar team, which was never adopted due to the financial officers' divergent schedules and the lack of a local administrative presence to coordinate and set agendas for the meetings. We believe the town should reconsider implementing this recommendation in light of changed circumstances.

Many towns throughout the state have improved their fiscal planning and operations by establishing financial management teams. By opening up lines of communication, regular meetings of the team increase the finance officers' understanding of their interdepartmental goals. The meetings also serve to foster knowledge transfer and reinforce procedural consistency. Consequently, this best practice helps to manage the risks involved with employee turnover, which is always a particular concern in the state's smallest towns. With the loss of the former consultant-assessor, these meetings will help the assessing chair in developing effective working protocols with the other finance managers. Finally, regular meetings of the team are likely to be highly beneficial for the new town administrator to gain exposure to critical tasks, the town's financial condition and trends, and the general workings of each office.

[4] This report can also be used to compare tax billing cycles. The majority of communities with populations under 1,000 (63%) use the semiannual cycle, like Washington. However, the quarterly cycle predominates among those with populations above that mark, being found in 65% of municipalities with populations in the 1,000 to 2,000 range.

Accordingly, we encourage the select board to adopt a version of the draft policy previously delivered but with revisions to reflect the team composition suggested here. We also encourage town leaders to find creative, flexible methods for implementing the policy despite work schedule issues, such as using technology to hold hybrid, in-person/remote meetings.

11. Consider Technology Upgrade to Streamline Excise Abatements

To reduce manual tasks and paperwork within the assessing department while also streamlining interdepartmental procedures related to excise abatements, the town could consider implementing an expansion of its current license agreement with the software vendor, Quality Data Systems Inc. (QDS). The collector uses a QDS application as her receivable control for property tax and motor vehicle excise (MVE) accounts.

Under the current procedures to process an approved MVE abatement, the board clerk types all the information related to the taxpayer's account and the abated amount into a certificate template in Excel. She then prints and mails a copy to the taxpayer and also distributes copies to the collector and town accountant. By implementing the new module, the board clerk could simply select the particular MVE account from within the QDS system and input the abated amount to create the certificate. With the two modules integrated in one system, the collector would receive notice of the abated amount within QDS. This eliminates a data entry step and can expedite the refund process as well.

The board clerk has had discussions with a QDS representative regarding a quote and believes it can be done for a discounted price of $1,000 per year with a waived installation fee. To determine if that cost justifies the upgrade's benefits, we suggest the board of assessors weigh the quoted price against the department's statistics for average annual excise abatements and the gains to be realized in terms of increased efficiency, reduced paperwork, and decreased risk of errors from repeated data entries.

12. Conduct a Bylaw Review

We recommend the town conduct a substantive review of its bylaws. When we requested the general bylaws, we were told that no comprehensive document exists in the town clerk's office and that the longtime contracted town counsel also had no bylaws on file. Key to establishing officials' and employees' relationships and responsibilities, a town's general bylaws also help to explain residents' rights and obligations in their interactions with local government. A good set of bylaws defines and describes a community's government structure, appointing authorities, and prohibitions. Conversely, incomplete and disorganized documents create confusion and undermine confidence in government.

It is the town clerk's responsibility to maintain permanent records of all the town's legislative actions. To serve as a useful informational tool for residents and employees and enable reliable continuity of operations, all the adopted bylaws should be assembled in a single, cohesive document that is updated regularly. Similarly, there should be a single, running list of locally adopted statues organized by general law chapters juxtaposed with their acceptance dates. Only then can an orderly semblance of the town's operations emerge, especially given the pace of change that can occur in a short amount of time. For instance, within the past five fiscal years, town meeting has voted to:

- Accept five statutes of the general laws
- Adopt three new bylaws
- Create three new revolving funds to go along with the five already in existence, all of which are required by statute to have bylaw provisions

We recommend the select board direct the town administrator to work with the town clerk to assemble the town's bylaws and local acceptances, beginning with a search of all the physical and digital files that may store them. The town clerk should then create separate, electronic documents for all of the general, zoning, and personnel bylaws, each one internally grouped by topic. A fourth document should list all local acceptances as well as any special acts.

Once these compilation tasks are completed, we recommend the select board appoint a bylaw committee of three to five members, composed of town employees and resident volunteers, to conduct a comprehensive review. The committee should be charged to review the bylaws; make recommendation on the those that should be retained, amended, or deleted; and propose new bylaws for adoption. For guidance, committee members can examine the bylaws of similar towns, and they should also seek input from residents, employees, and officials through public forums.

The committee should identify any missing positions, boards, and committees, and consider codifying financial procedures (e.g., budget process, capital planning, etc.). Relevant to assessing, we suggest drafting a bylaw for the board of assessors that outlines its composition and role, including the town's choice to have a three-member board versus the alternative membership sizes allowed by M.G.L. c. 41, § 24. As a best practice, FMRB also consistently recommends that towns codify the town administrator's powers and responsibilities.

At minimum, a one-year timetable should be anticipated to complete this work, and the revised code will need to be approved by town meeting and the Attorney General. For easy public access, a digital, searchable version of the final set of approved bylaws should then be posted on the town website.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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Laura Lafreniere, Board of Assessors Clerk
Sarah Navin, Board of Assessors Member