

CITY OF GARDNER, MASSACHUSETTS
CITY COUNCIL FINANCE COMMITTEE
MINUTES OF MEETING OF AUGUST 12, 2019

The Finance Committee meeting was called to order by President Scott Joseph Graves at 4:00 p.m. in the City Council Chamber, Room 219, City Hall.

Finance Committee Members present were Council President Scott Joseph Graves and Councillors Ronald Cormier and James Walsh.

Others participating or in attendance: Mayor Mark Hawke; City Auditor John Richard; Human Resources Director Debra Pond; and, City Clerk Alan Agnelli.

President Graves asked if anyone present planned to record the meeting, in accordance with the requirements of the Open Meeting Law, as follows:

Any person may make a video or audio recording of the open session of this meeting so long as it does not interfere with the conduct of the meeting. All documents and exhibits used or referenced at this meeting shall be submitted in duplicate to the City Clerk, as they become part of the minutes of the meeting. Is there anyone present who will be recording this meeting?

No one responded.

INTERVIEW

Melanie Rajaniemi

- Presently Treasurer/Collector in the Town of Leicester since October, 2018.
- Formerly Assistant Treasurer in the Town of Athol, September 2017 to October 2018.
- Formerly Assistant Health Agent, Athol Board of Health, October 2015 to September 2017.

Ms. Rajaniemi stated that she applied for the Gardner position since it fits with her experience and career goals. She really enjoys working in the Town of Leicester as she has a great boss and staff, but that the daily commute from Athol to Leicester is challenging.

She utilizes the Vadar System software program in Leicester, has not used MUNIS, but is comfortable with her ability to adapt to new software systems. In her current position, she has the same responsibilities (as Gardner) and has an Assistant Collector and another clerical person. She is familiar with State laws and regulations governing municipal treasury and collections – bank states, accounts, etc.

On questioning about Tax Title, Ms. Rajaniemi said that her predecessor in Leicester did not confront Tax Title properties for 5 years, so that there are presently over 100 properties in Tax Title. The Town Administrator is working with her to assemble a new process to address these properties. The Town contracts with Berenson & Bloom for Tax Title Legal work.

Her goal is to acquire the Treasurer/Collector's position and to stay for the long-term.

On questioning by Mr. Richard, Ms. Rajaniemi stated that she works very closely with the Town Accountant on reconciliations, Free Cash certifications, etc.

On questioning by Mayor Hawke, Ms. Rajaniemi stated that she has undertaken short and

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long-term borrowing (highway and new school), but not investments.

On inquiry by President Graves, Ms. Rajaniemi informed the Committee that since she is under Contract with the Town of Leicester, she is required to provide the Town with 45 days advance notice before departure.

Councillor James Walsh informed Ms. Rajaniemi that the positions of Treasurer and Collector of Taxes are elected by the City Council, in accordance with the City Charter. The offices, however, work closely with the Mayor and requires cooperation. Adding that there is the prospect for conflict, he asked how she would approach conflicts.

Ms. Rajaniemi stated that she is a professional, has experience in different positions, and thinks before she speaks or acts.

Councillor Ronald Cormier noted that Ms. Rajaniemi obtained a Paralegal Certificate from BU and asked her if she has utilized her paralegal skills.

Ms. Rajaniemi stated that she has not had the opportunity to utilize her paralegal training in the Town of Athol, as there were no opportunities available. She then informed the interview panel that she will begin the DOR-sponsored Treasurer and Collector schools at UMASS Amherst this week (for 3 days), over a period of three years for certification following passage of the respective examinations.

Councillor Walsh questioned whether she implemented any systems improvements or efficiencies during her tenure in Leicester.

Ms. Rajaniemi stated that in Leicester, she implemented daily cash deposits, as opposed to weekly deposits performed by her predecessor. While in Athol, she created databases to track health insurance changes and cancellations which, she noted, the same problem arose in Leicester which required tracking.

President Graves asked Ms. Rajaniemi about her salary expectations.

Ms. Rajaniemi stated that she does not know what the pay range is or the Grade of the position, but noted that Ms. Daigle has been in the positions for many years. She added that she was hired in Leicester with 4 weeks of vacation, which is important to her.

Ms. Rajaniemi departed at 4:24 p.m.

President Graves opened the discussion about the Committee's recommendation for election to the position.

Councillor Walsh and President Graves expressed concern that the 45-day advance notice requirement appeared to be a disadvantage, since the City needs to act swiftly to replace Ms. Daigle, who is retiring on the 16th of August.

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HR Director Debra Pond added that it takes time to schedule CORI and drug tests for new employees.

Mayor Hawke said that the City could not get anyone sooner than the first week in September.

Councillor James Walsh informed the panel that he supports Jennifer Dymek and said that he assumed that she is bondable. He added that she would not have to undergo drug testing and a CORI check.

President Graves asked if the Committee is satisfied with the four candidates that were interviewed.

Councillor Ronald Cormier moved to recommend to the City Council to elect Jennifer Dymek to the positions of City Treasurer and City Collector of Taxes.

Councillor James Walsh seconded the motion.

President Graves added that Ms. Dymek and her work is known to the Committee.

City Auditor John Richard noted that Jen Dymek is responsive to his office, that she reconciles her office accounts “to the penny” and believes that she would do well as Treasurer and Collector.

On the motion, it was unanimously voted to recommend to the City Council to elect Jennifer Dymek to the positions of City Treasurer and City Collector of Taxes.

Mayor Hawke questioned the starting compensation.

Councillor Walsh informed the Committee that the City has an Ordinance defining fixed compensation for the position and that the salary range from the 2015 Study that the Mayor cited was never implemented. He said that the range is outdated since it dates back to FY2015 and, if annual cost-of-living adjustments of 2% are factored and compounded each year since, then the low end of the range is higher than the current pay for the position. He added that if the City had adopted a Step System for compensation, then “we wouldn’t be having this discussion.”

President Graves reaffirmed that the City Council has only the current salary by the Ordinance with which to compensate the new Treasurer/Collector; however, the Mayor could propose an amendment to the salary by filing a new Ordinance.

ADJOURNMENT

On a motion by Councillor James Walsh and seconded by Councillor Ronald Cormier, it was voted to adjourn at 4:39 p.m.