



Massachusetts Municipal Association

MMA BEST PRACTICES SERIES

Recommendations for Effective Local Government Administration and Management from MMA Policy Committees

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MMA Policy Committee on Personnel and Labor Relations

Best Practice Recommendation: Replacing Civil Service with Modern Personnel Systems to Manage Public Safety Departments

BEST PRACTICE: The management of police and fire departments is an increasingly sophisticated responsibility, with modern community policing practices, advanced fire suppression techniques, and knowledge of complex tactics, technology and human behavior becoming the norm. In order to meet the needs of modern public safety departments, many communities are seeking to establish personnel systems that provide chiefs and hiring managers with the flexibility they need to staff their departments with the most qualified candidates, as opposed to the more rigid, test-based structure imposed by the Civil Service system. While many communities already exempt their police or fire chiefs from Civil Service, more communities are considering doing so for all of their public safety employees.

When electing to leave the Civil Service system in these cases, municipalities should be ready to go with a comprehensive personnel system that reflects the needs of the community. Labor leaders should be consulted during the decision-making process, including discussion of the departure from the Civil Service system and the establishment of the new framework. The goal would be a system that gives chiefs and hiring managers needed flexibility in making personnel decisions – flexibility that they do not have when operating under the antiquated Civil Service system.

As a city or town considers leaving the Civil Service system, the issue of preference for veterans is certain to be raised, so it is important to prepare for this discussion. The existing Civil Service system gives veterans substantial preference in the hiring and promotion process. Municipalities must decide if they want to include similar preference in their new policies, or give those making personnel decisions more flexibility. Veteran status is an important consideration, but a sound system should also allow communities to recruit, retain and promote the most qualified candidates. It will be important to work with local stakeholders to create a system that does not bind the hands of chiefs and hiring managers.

A number of cities and towns that have elected to exempt either chiefs or entire public safety departments from the Civil Service statutes have received local approval and navigated the home-rule petition process. Municipalities that are considering this option now or in the future should examine the personnel systems that these communities have adopted. While there is not a “one-size-fits-all” solution, these frameworks can serve as a starting point for developing a

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policy for your municipality. Below is a list of municipal officials who have been successful in leading their communities out of the old Civil Service system and installing a more dynamic and accountable system in its place. Copies of their policies can be obtained by contacting the MMA's Legislative Division at ndowning@mma.org or (617) 426-7272.

Resources:

Burlington Town Administrator John Petrin: (781) 270-1635

Wellesley Police Chief Terrence Cunningham: (781) 235-0062

Norwood Police Chief William Brooks: (781) 440-5150