

## MEMORANDUM

Monday, February 8, 2021

To: Holliston Select Board

From: Holliston Stipend Committee

Re: Report summary and findings

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The Holliston Stipend Committee, comprised of five members appointed by the Select Board, were tasked with the following, outlined in a Memorandum of Travis Ahern dated August 18, 2020:

*Charge of the Stipend Subcommittee Discuss the use of stipends or other benefits, such as tax relief, provided to volunteer, appointed, and/or elected officials of the Boards and Committees in the Town of Holliston. Research and benchmark the Town of Holliston's use of stipends or other benefits provided to Boards and Committees in relation to other municipalities in the Commonwealth of Massachusetts with similar demographics and structure of government as the Town of Holliston. Provide a recommendation to the Select Board, on or before Monday, January 4, 2021, regarding the future use of stipends or other benefits in the Town of Holliston for all Boards and Committees, and if stipends or other benefits should be used, determine the appropriate amount of said stipends or other benefits.*

The members, Shelly Bochner, Tom Dumas, Erica Plunkett, Joan Shaughnessy, and Thomas Whynot, conducted extensive research, data gathering and synthesis, summarized below.

### Methodology and Findings:

The Stipend Committee, in a quest to fulfill its charter, culled data from various publicly available records relating to the municipalities in the identified peer group. This universe included those towns selected by the Governance Committee, using a variety of criteria identifying towns as comparable to Holliston.<sup>1</sup> In addition to these communities, the Stipend Committee included three additional, based on geography and similar demographics: Hopkinton, Medfield and Hanover. The total universe – [linked here](#) - comprises 18 towns.

55% of the cohort towns offered stipends to volunteer Boards/Committees. Of those municipalities, 80% offered a stipend to the Select Board, and 70% to their Board of Assessors. It is worth mentioning that two of the 10 towns (20%) offering a stipend do so only to their

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<sup>1</sup> [Holliston Governance Committee Minutes of August 3, 2020](#)

Town Moderator; in one other, the only stipend is offered to the Select Board. Every town offering a stipend to the Board of Assessors, also offers a stipend to their Select Board. The compensation amounts vary from \$500 - \$18,000.

In looking at the Assessor function, it is important to recognize that towns in the Commonwealth vary in how their offices are staffed and run. In some municipalities, there is a Principal Assessor and some manner of assistants, in a few communities the assessors are appointed by the Town Manager or similar; two-thirds of the Commonwealth's Assessors are elected.<sup>2</sup> In many towns, there is an assessor on staff at the town level, and a volunteer board supporting/overseeing/working in conjunction with that professional.

The publicly available information is not reported in such a way that the delineation between stipend, salary or other compensation is clear. It is also difficult to glean data relating to roles and responsibilities of each committee by town. As such, the HSC formulated a [survey](#) to get some more detailed information in an effort to compare the models utilized in other towns versus Holliston. Additionally, the Committee hoped to determine whether there was any relationship, statistically speaking, between stipends or other compensation - be it monetary or other - and rates of volunteerism.

Only seven towns responded to the survey (a 38% response rate); four of which responded affirmatively to the question of whether stipends are offered in their community (representing 57%). Despite this, all seven respondents answered the survey question relating to their belief that stipends affect rates of volunteerism. Only one administrator responded affirmatively. Clearly, the HSC was unable to get at a statistically significant guidepost – via this survey or other methodology – about the impact of stipends, or other remuneration, on volunteer boards and committees.

The HSC also conducted an [internal survey](#) of those Boards who are currently offered a stipend, the Select Board and the Board of Assessors. There were four responses total, and the results were evenly split on the question of whether stipends affect decision-making to run/be appointed to committees/boards.

## **Conclusions:**

Despite the enormity of effort in information gathering, the Holliston Stipend Committee is unable to reach a data-driven, non-subjective answer to the overarching question posed to it: should Holliston offer stipends to otherwise volunteer or appointed committees/boards, and if yes, to whom and how much?

Simply put: the research shows that some towns do offer stipends, some do not. There is not statistically significant data to answer the question whether stipends or other remuneration are catalysts for volunteerism. What the Committee did find, through this process, experience and/or observations is that there are some universal truths:

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<sup>2</sup> Massachusetts DOR,-DLS, *City and Town*, July 2014

- Every town struggles at times to fill volunteer posts, particularly those that are less visible, e.g., planning board, housing, board of health, assessors.
- In Holliston, those individuals who volunteer do so in the name of service, and care deeply about the welfare of our community. Conversely, those with a single-purpose agenda are generally one-term volunteers, or are otherwise rooted out by osmosis, i.e., the totality of the work is unnerving, and they resign.
- Every board is a “working board” in Holliston, comprised of individuals who care deeply about the community, and generously give of their time, energy, effort, and expertise in service to it.
- It takes time and energy for any town’s professional staff to acclimate new volunteers.
- There is value to continuity of service, i.e., once the volunteer comes up the learning curve, it well serves the professional town staff to have volunteers who are familiar with the laws, regulations, technicalities and nuances of their particular role.
- There is no statistical evidence that a stipend has any effect on the amount of effort or intellectual capital expended.
- There is no data-driven evidence that offering or not offering remuneration has any effect on recruitment and retention of qualified and dedicated volunteers.
- Of the towns in the identified peer group that offer stipends, a vast majority offer them to the Select Board and the Board of Assessors, consistent with Holliston’s practice.
- Whether or not to offer stipends is a wholly subjective issue, and a matter of town legacy and budget priority.

What potentially differentiates the Board of Assessors from other volunteer posts is not in the hours expended and expertise gained and implemented; this is universally beneficial and in Holliston, common practice. Likewise, this board is not unique in making decisions that may be unpopular on matters that are deeply personal to their neighbors. Rather, what sets the Board of Assessors apart is the required one-week training that must be completed. This in-residence training, yielding a certification in assessing, is held at UMASS Amherst and consists of a full M-F work week. The newly sworn in members must spend a week at the college and away from their families, jobs, businesses, practices, potentially foregoing compensation or hard-earned vacation in service to the town.

The Stipend Committee believes that this required week away, and forfeiture of compensation, could substantiate a stipend from the town. In determining an appropriate figure for said week and subsequent three-year recertification cycle by the Massachusetts Department of Revenue, the HSC endeavored to calculate fair and reasonable compensation. The inflation-adjusted<sup>3</sup> median family income in Holliston for December 2020 is \$131,363. <sup>4</sup> That figure, expressed as a weekly sum, is \$2,526.

Assessing is a highly technical, multi-faceted responsibility. In some communities, this function is performed by volunteers who rubber stamp the work of the professional municipal staff.

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<sup>3</sup> U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, CPI Inflation Calculator

<sup>4</sup> U.S. Census Bureau statistics

Holliston is fortunate to have Board members who take painstaking measures to make sure the assessment is accurate as it pertains to Holliston, and not fit into a state standard rubric or metric that would not make sense to a town as dynamic and evolving as Holliston.

The Stipend Committee, based on interviews and surveys, believes that should the stipend be removed from the current Board of Assessors, the town would risk losing those volunteers who were elected with an offered stipend, and be in a position where there is not continuity and institutional knowledge on a going forward basis. This is particularly critical at present, as the town's highly-regarded Principal Assessor, Katherine Pierce, has indicated a desire to retire in the near future. A recurring theme in interviews and [survey responses](#) was the emphasis on the continuity of institutional knowledge, which benefits the taxpayers of Holliston, and most notably, the seniors in town

The other body receiving a stipend, the Select Board, is highly visible and the decisions of these three members are subject to public scrutiny in a way that no other boards in town experience. What is not as evident to the public is the enormity of knowledge that must be gained by new members to the Board. The laws and regulations promulgated by the Commonwealth, Holliston's own by-laws and charter requirements, the nuances of the relationships among the town boards and departments; how all of these interrelate and have been historically interpreted by the town weigh heavily on these leaders. This responsibility could be used to substantiate a stipend from the Town. However, these same characteristics - albeit less consistently visibly - apply to many other boards: School Committee, Finance Committee, Planning Board, Board of Health, and so many others.

The HSC research shows that out of the Towns that offer stipends - excluding those who offer compensation only to the town Moderator - all offer to their Select Board. 88% of those towns also offer a stipend to their Board of Assessors. [It is worth noting that only 8 out of 18, or 44%, offer stipends to volunteer posts other than the moderator.] The HSC was unable to unearth the rationale behind these commonalities, and simply point out: Holliston's practice is similar to other towns in the identified peer universe who offer stipends.

In conclusion, the Holliston Stipend Committee endeavored to find data-driven answers to the questions posed in the committee charter, and found the data is either non-existent, or so granular as to not offer statistically significant findings. At the end of the day, the members' feelings or opinions on the matter are just that. We believe this is an issue not to be unilaterally decided by any one board or committee, rather, the historical backdrop of these stipend offerings warrant a vote of the taxpayers at Town Meeting.