

THE TOWN OF SOUTHWICK, MA

CHIEF ADMINISTRATIVE OFFICER/TOWN ADMINISTRATOR

RECRUITMENT

Invitation to Qualified Candidates

Southwick, MA, a vibrant community of 9,300 residents, is actively seeking an innovative and dedicated Chief Administrative Officer/Town Administrator committed to maintaining organizational excellence. This pivotal role follows the retirement of a highly esteemed leader who dedicated 35 years of service to the town. Nestled in western Massachusetts, Southwick epitomizes the quintessential New England charm. The town is strategically located within a short distance of exceptional recreational areas and key urban centers like Hartford, Springfield, and Amherst.



These areas boast world-class medical facilities, educational institutions, and rich cultural experiences. Southwick's rich heritage in rural farming juxtaposes with its bustling atmosphere, fostering a "hometown feel." The community harmoniously blends residential, commercial, and agricultural interests, priding itself on being designated as a Right-to-Farm Community.

Operating under an Open Town Meeting form of government, Southwick is overseen by a three-member Select Board. Southwick has earned a reputation for political and financial stability, guided by prudent budgeting practices. For the fiscal year 2024, the operating budget stands at \$34.3 million, encompassing schools and supported by an 81-member team of dedicated full-time employees, including 21 Police Officers and 12 Firefighters. Furthermore, Southwick maintains substantial reserves and holds an impressive Aa2 bond rating by Moody's Investors Services.

The ideal candidate for this role will possess a bachelor's degree in political science, business, or public administration (a master's degree is preferred). Moreover, we seek individuals with a minimum of six years of progressive municipal management and leadership experience or a relevant combination of education and experience. The salary for this position falls within the range of \$125,000 - \$150,000, commensurate with qualifications, and includes a competitive benefits package.

Southwick is an equal opportunity employer and does not discriminate based upon race, religion, color, national origin, gender (including pregnancy, childbirth, or related medical conditions), sexual orientation, age, status as a protected veteran, status as an individual with a disability, or other applicable legally protected characteristics.

For additional information related to the search, contact Alan Gould, President, Municipal Resources Inc. at 603-279-0352, x 320.

ADDITIONAL INFORMATION: www.mrigov.com/career <https://www.southwickma.org/>

DEADLINE: 8 AM EST; Tuesday, January 16th resume and cover letter, in confidence as PDF attachment to: recruitment@mrigov.com

THE PROFILE

The *Ideal* Candidate for the position of Southwick, CAO/ Administrator will have:

BA/BS degree in Public Administration or Business Administration and at least six years of prior full-time compensated executive experience in public, not for profit or business administration. A Master's Degree in Public Administration or an MBA as well as being a Massachusetts Certified Public Procurement Officer is preferred.

A record of successful financial experience in budgeting, capital improvement planning, debt management, grant writing/administration, public procurement and coordination with Finance Committee.

Ability to be creative leader and identify innovative solutions to complex municipal revenue and expenditure challenges. Team building and collaboration is an essential skill for the next CAO/TA.

Ability to “listen” and to provide the highest level of professional recommendations and options to elected and appointed Town officials. Demonstrated skills in working collaboratively and building consensus with many and sometimes conflicting constituencies. Be accessible to all residents and be willing to reach out and solicit input from the entire community. Involve the community in the decision-making process.

Effective public speaking, writing and presentation skills. Proficiency in the use of electronic media with a strong emphasis on using available tools and platforms to communicate with the public.

Knowledge of and experience with collective bargaining, labor relations, personnel management and with MGL Chap.150E.

Appreciation of the rural nature of Southwick and the desire by its residents to maintain its character for all future generations.

Record of leading by example and nurturing a positive culture in town offices by supporting, respecting and empowering employees while avoiding “micro-managing” departments. Use and promote technology to improve management/accounting/payroll information and internal communication.

Experience with creative economic development initiatives, land use and zoning, planning/transportation as well as embracing and promoting large and small existing businesses.

About Southwick

The Town of Southwick was settled in the early 1700's and it didn't take long for the settlers to recognize the land once inhabited by Native American tribes was some of the most fertile in the region. This location was rich in good soil, abundant fish, and plentiful game and provided the early settlers with all that was needed to start a farming community. The settlement was located in the southernmost part of the Town of Westfield and after a petition by the residents the Great and General Court officially incorporated the Town of Southwick on November 7, 1770. Following its incorporation as a town there was a thirty-four-year



border dispute between the residents of Southwick, Massachusetts, and Suffield, Connecticut over the land area known as the "jog". In 1804 the Commonwealth of Massachusetts and the State of Connecticut reached a compromise and established the town and state boundaries that exist today. This "jog" is the southernmost part of western Massachusetts.

From its beginning, Southwick has been an agricultural community, known for its variety of crops; corn, hay, vegetables, tobacco, livestock as well as dairy farms. The rivers and streams were the locations for powder mills, sawmills, and gristmills. The town benefited from being on the Northeast Railroad Corridor which connected Southwick with the eastern cities between New York and Boston. This brought commerce and tourists to the community. In the summer months folks from the cities came to Southwick by train to recreate at the beaches, hotels, guest houses, and dance halls on the Congamond Lakes. In the winter the lakes provided the ice for the ice harvesting industry, which stored the ice blocks in local ice houses and then they were shipped to the cities as far away as Boston and New York in the warm months. In addition, local farmers were able to get their produce to markets all along the rail line.

Today Southwick has a population of 9,300 residents and is a thriving suburb of Springfield, Westfield, and Hartford. The town is a Right to Farm Community and is proud of its agricultural heritage and rural character. There are eleven working farms of various sizes in town. Through thoughtful planning the community is an attractive blend of these farms, open spaces, residential areas, and recreational destinations. Southwick is known as an ideal place to live and raise a family. The residents value the small town, rural feel, and culture of the community as well as its natural assets. The recreational opportunities abound, from the Congamond Lakes to the Southwick Rail Trail and New England Trail to camping and hiking Sodom and Provin mountains.



There is a small and healthy commercial and industrial tax base in town. Currently, there are two precision manufacturing companies, WGI and B&E Tool Company. Whalley Computer Associates is one of the largest computer resellers in the United States. There are a number of small to medium-sized commercial businesses and stores with Big Y being the largest grocery market in town. The town's public education is provided by the Southwick-Granville-Tolland Regional School District with an approximate enrollment of 1,500 students in grades Pre-K to 12. For public higher educational opportunities, Holyoke Community College and Westfield State University are close by as well as a number of private colleges.

The new Chief Administrative Officer/Town Administrator will be facing a number of challenges over the next few years. He or she must have the leadership ability and skill to work with the elected and appointed officials to navigate through the challenges and recognize the opportunities that lay ahead.

THE CHALLENGES

Economic Development

Southwick, like so many of the communities in Massachusetts, has experienced numerous challenges to balance a desired economic development strategy that will preserve the historic, cultural, and rural characteristics of the community while providing tax relief to help offset the tax burden on an aging and relatively stable population. Recently, the community experienced a highly controversial large-scale project that became a very divisive issue in the town that involved numerous residents in the debate over what the town deems acceptable and sustainable commercial/Industrial development and what was seen as overbearing and not within the character of the town. Much of this discussion has been identified within the Vision 2040 Master Plan which is currently being reviewed by the community for acceptance. Clearly, with the proximity to major numbered routes through the town including state Routes 10/202 as well as Route 57, the town has opportunities to attract small and mid-sized commercial businesses, services, and industrial entities. Many in the community believe the best alternatives going forward would be to increase support for small and medium-sized business and service industries like restaurants or retail stores, mixed use developments including housing opportunities especially in the downtown corridor, light industrial manufacturing, and utilizing the wonderful recreational business opportunities around the Congamond Lakes region. The town does have the advantage of a significant area that is zoned for industrial development and has access to municipal sewer services for the area. The town also has a long history of a successful agricultural/farming tradition that many believe should be promoted and supported as an economic development initiative that is farm-friendly. The town has an active Economic Development Committee that has been aggressive in working with all affected parties to promote the municipality and its economic development vision. The challenge for the next CAO/TA will be to balance the various initiatives being supported by the town to help the community coalesce around a sustainable economic plan that can provide additional tax revenue for the community.



Labor Relations/Human Resources

The CAO has responsibility of dealing with all HR issues as defined in the job description as the Personnel Manager for the town. The community currently faces a number of issues related to labor relations dealing with several unsettled collective bargaining contracts, the high cost of health insurance as well as the current 50-50% split in the share between the town obligations and the employee payments for health insurance. In addition, the town is facing the same issue that most communities are dealing with in today's environment: namely the difficulty in attracting and retaining employees in the very competitive employee friendly environment. In recognition of this important operational issue, the town identified the need to create an Assistant CAO/HR Director position to assist the CAO in dealing with these complex and time-consuming matters and share the burden of this important municipal function. The issue of retention and recruitment in local government crosses all aspects of employment and includes the difficulty in recruiting public safety, public works, town hall employees as well as school department staff. A major aspect of the difficulty in recruitment and retention is the health insurance share of the cost for individual employees. The new CAO needs to address this by offering creative and innovative approaches to health insurance costs. The town has recognized some inequities in its current wage and classification schedule and has engaged an outside consultant to conduct a comprehensive review of wages and benefits offered in Southwick versus many of its comparable communities. The new CAO will need to instill in staff a positive team attitude and a recognition that they are being heard by the administration regarding concerns of equity and fairness in their chosen profession.

Finance and Budget

This Town has a long tradition of strong financial planning and fiscally conservative budgeting of both revenues and expenditures and the Finance Committee, Select Board and the administration deserves credit for these fiscal accomplishments. The FY '24 budget is \$28.4M of which 45.5% is for the town's assessment from the Southwick-Granville-Tolland Regional School District for Pre-K to grade 12 educational services.

CAO/Town Administrator– Town of Southwick, MA

Moody's Investors Service assigned Southwick with its Aa2 investment grade bond rating. This is a noteworthy achievement for a municipality of less than 10,000 residents that relies heavily on residential real estate taxes and only has a limited commercial/industrial/personal property tax base. Moody's recognizes that the town has a history of careful financial planning, conservative management, low debt burden, and manageable pension obligations. The town engages in regular financial monitoring, both short and long-term, to identify and address areas of financial weakness, underperformance, or imbalance.

The town's financial reserves are healthy: Free Cash is certified at \$3.8M (this is an impressive 13% of the operating budget), the Stabilization Fund is \$2.88M. The town adopted the Community Preservation Act at 3% and the balance in that fund is \$3.05M. There are three special revenue funds for water, sewer and EMS with good balances in retained earnings: the water fund has \$230K and the sewer fund has \$232K. The Fire Department has a revolving account for ambulance revenues/expenditures.

The town departments are well managed with seasoned department heads and employees. The Police Department has 21 Officers, and the Fire Department operates with 12 full-time employees and 15 Call Fire Fighters. The Fire Department operates a full-time Advanced Life Support (ALS) emergency medical service to the residents of Southwick and neighboring municipalities.

The special challenge of the next Chief Administrative Officer is to continue to balance the annual operating budget with the competing town and school budget needs/requests. As stated previously, the town's ability to raise taxes is limited due to the fact that the residential taxpayers pay the vast majority of the property taxes, 88.5%, while the commercial/industrial/personal property tax base is far less, 11.5% of the total tax base. Over the years conservative budgeting, realistic revenue estimating, and constant financial management/monitoring have yielded good results, but this is not sustainable going forward, especially when the cost of goods and services are increasing at a faster pace than the town's ability to raise property taxes. This is especially true with the increasing labor costs and the budget assessments from the Regional School District. The new CAO will need to develop a good working relationship with the school administration to address these concerns in the future. In addition, he or she will also need to have experience with economic development and be able to attract businesses to continue to build the commercial/industrial tax base. This will take some of the burden off the residential taxpayer.



Master Plan

The Town recently finished the Southwick 2040 Master Plan. It's the result of a two-year process of public meetings, community outreach, and resident input. The Southwick Master Plan Advisory Committee was formed to guide the process. They reviewed available data from local, state, and federal sources to understand the current or existing conditions in town. Numerous workshops were held on topics including; land use, housing, transportation, recreation, economic development, etc. These workshops looked at the existing strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats facing Southwick and through this process it gave residents the opportunity to tell the committee what they wanted their town to "look like" in 2040. This valuable information formed the basis for the eight main themes that came out of this community-wide planning process. They are: land use, housing, economic development, historical and cultural resources, open space and natural resources, transportation, and public services and facilities. The Master Plan includes multi-year strategies and actions for each of the eight themes for the community to follow. The new Chief Administrative Officer/Town Administrator is fortunate to have "Vision 2040" as a blueprint to guide him or her in the years ahead.

SOUTHWICK 2040 VISION

Southwick's distinctive Massachusetts location crossing the Connecticut border makes us a desirable southern New England community. Residents and visitors of all ages enjoy natural resources including lakes and fertile farmland uniquely balanced with modern services and a vibrant social atmosphere. We welcome small to mid-size businesses from services, light manufacturing, and agriculture to technology and innovative start-ups and help them thrive, adapt and grow-while enhancing our community.

Finally, the ideal candidate must possess outstanding verbal and written communication skills. It is imperative that the Chief Administrative Officer/Town Administrator be able to communicate effectively



with town leaders, staff, volunteers, and the public. It is the Administrator's responsibility to keep the public informed. He or she must be committed to operational transparency and possess the ability to communicate clearly and use social media to present Southwick's message. He or she must leverage emerging technologies and other creative ways to promote community involvement. Customer service is a high priority with the Select Board, which means the successful candidate must place great value on listening and providing accurate

information to all members of the community, so all segments of the town have the opportunity to be engaged in the significant decisions facing Southwick in the next few years.