



# Town of Orange

## Office of the Board of Selectmen

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Orange, MA 01364



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### **A letter to Taxpayers explaining the strategy and reasoning for salary increases to be presented to our 2024 Annual Town Meeting**

**June, 2023**

Our town employees are our most valuable asset. Without them, we can accomplish nothing. Over the past few years, we have had a high number of skilled and experienced employees leave us for better-paying positions, and at the same time we have had increasing difficulty in attracting new employees to fill the vacancies. One important factor in this challenge is that the wages we offer are not keeping up with the economy.

Recognizing that hiring and training new employees is extremely expensive and inefficient, we have gradually made progress toward increasing our wage offerings to ensure that our employees are fairly compensated for their work. Thanks to the generosity and understanding of Town Meeting, increases negotiated with our unions have been supported over the past year, enabling us to once again attract and retain skilled firefighters, EMTs, and maintenance workers. The result of recent negotiations will be presented to Town Meeting and will result in competitive wages for police and clerical union members as well.

Adjustments to non-union and department head wages have been the remaining challenge. The Finance Committee presented a plan last year to make adjustments based on an internal survey, but the plan was rejected by Town Meeting in favor of a professional study. Accordingly, the Town engaged the Edward J. Collins, Jr. Center for Public Management (Collins Center) to conduct a classification and compensation study. The data and preliminary results of that study form the basis of the plan we will present to you at the June 20, 2023 Annual Town Meeting.

A working group comprised of a quorum of the Selectboard and a subset of the Finance Committee met on Saturday, May 20, to discuss how to use the results of the Collins Center study to arrive at recommended salaries for 2024. (That meeting was recorded by AOTV, and it can be viewed any time at [www.aotv13.org](http://www.aotv13.org).)

The Town provided Collins with a list of positions to be evaluated. Collins staff gathered available job descriptions and interviewed each employee to arrive at a grade system that reflects requirements and level of responsibility of each job. The resulting table identifies position grades A through G, with A representing positions with the greatest amount of authority and responsibility. Collins then assigned a range of salaries for each grade, based upon data collected from 12 other communities including Orange. The maximum and minimum of each range represents a 30% difference. This study is not complete at this time, but it has provided initial information to assist us to move forward in the right direction while it is being finalized.

The working group agreed to make salary recommendations based on the following framework and assumptions:

- We would follow the Collins grade structure.
- We applied the information based on the hours worked by each employee. The Collins information is presented as hourly rates, making it possible to be accurate with this.
- We only looked at department heads and non-union employees.
- Where an existing employee salary fell within the range for the grade already, we assigned a 4% COLA.

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- Where a salary fell below the minimum of the range for the grade, we either raised it to the minimum for the grade, or assigned 4%, whichever was greater.
- The Collins Center identified a few positions that belonged in a higher grade, based on the job requirements. Therefore, a few raises that may appear drastic are a necessary upward adjustment to properly acknowledge the level of responsibility.
- Employees with significant longevity (Sanitation Manager, Town Clerk) were recommended at the mid-point of the range. Time in position is one of the factors that the Collins process states should move individuals to higher points in the grade scale.
- New positions (Community Development Director, Economic Development Director) were not changed.
- Highway Superintendent salary was calculated based on an average from similar-sized towns, resulting in a recommendation that is approximately 75% of the grade A range. The Airport Manager was assigned the same, in this case also considering his extreme longevity in the position.

The Collins draft report did not offer data to help us arrive at fair increases for the Police Chief and Fire Chief. After the meeting on the 20<sup>th</sup>, the Selectboard decided to recommend the original budget proposal of an 8.7% raise for both chiefs.

The working committee recognizes that this is the beginning of a process, not the end. This is the first step towards getting each employee to their correct level of compensation. We pursue this strategy for recommended raises in order to immediately seek Town Meeting agreement to make essential adjustments to salaries of essential personnel for FY 2024.

Once the study is completed, the plan will determine the correct level of compensation within the grade range for each employee and a schedule for reaching that level. It will also include the criteria for moving up within the range (typically an annual step increase) and for applying a COLA increase to adjust the scale as a whole. It also should state how frequently the entire plan should be reviewed - or at least when it should next be reviewed.

With the help of the Collins Center, we will be completing the plan over the coming fiscal year. Again, the Collins Center report is still a draft, and we have many unanswered questions that will be asked and answered before the report is final.

We hope that this approach will be seen as fair and reasonable, and that Town Meeting will agree to fund these positions at the recommended levels.

Thank you.

Selectboard, Town of Orange

Finance Committee, Town of Orange