

Winter 2006/2007

# Heart of New Hampshire

*Celebrating the Heart & Soul of New Hampshire*

## Magazine

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*Stephen Hodecker 2007*

# Municipal Minute Men & Women

An erstwhile government in exile, MRI operates within the existing envelope and pushes it at the same time.

You'd think that Meredith, NH would be an unlikely spot for one of the most respected Municipal Consulting firms in the country but it's just where the folks at Municipal Resources Inc. want to be and they are quite happy here, thank you very much.

And while they recently opened a new office in Pennsylvania, at the request of, and in alliance with, the Pennsylvania League of Cities and Municipalities, they have no intention of moving their base any closer to the "action". After all with the Internet allowing them to communicate instantly and the "skirmishes" spread all over the eastern seaboard, it makes sense to have the home-stead somewhere safe, peaceful and relatively quiet. . . somewhere where a feller can think a spell.

That's because "thinking a spell" is a critical part of the ethos at MRI. It's not enough to be the Kelly Girl of municipalities – providing expertise when and where it's needed. Every member of the MRI team is equal parts status quo expert and change agent - Capable of stepping into a high level position in any size community and providing a smooth transition, while at the same time analyzing and assessing systems to make them more efficient and responsive to the public. That's just how it should be. Because MRI operates on the assumption that their goal is to offer both strong operational fundamentals and creative community development.

## Two Roads Diverging

(With apologies to Robert Frost) To fully understand what MRI does one has to recognize that their work takes two divergent tracks that ultimately are intended to re-converge both philosophically and practically at some point in the future. It

is as if the Minute Men at MRI march together to the point of divergence on that well known trail and half of them take the well traveled road while the others take the less traveled road, each traveler intent on seeing the roads re-converge by virtue of their hard work and vision.

## The Well Traveled Road

The government sector of our economy is no different than the private sector when it comes to turnover of personnel. Individuals come and go for a variety of reasons. However, when a high level municipal employee is fired or resigns or



Caricature by Liane LeBlanc

even dies, often there is an urgency that may not exist within the private sector. After all keeping a town or city operating smoothly is a 24/7 task. The long term vacancy of a key player could mean lost grant funding; infrastructure crises; lapses in services or a hundred other problems that could effect the day to day lives of the citizens of any given community. For this reason, in most cases, a municipality does not have the leisure of leaving the post vacant while they conduct a national search to replace the employee.

Under those circumstances, there is no bat-light to shine into the night sky, or "Ghostbuster" line to call. But a growing

number of Municipalities have MRI on their speed dial and know that the answer to the question "who you gonna call?" is RMI. With a senior government resource pool of talented individuals, MRI can usually have their vacancy filled with a capable and competent individual within a matter of days. Sometimes that individual will remain long enough for a search to be done by the town, and at other times the town will simply contract with MRI for the long-term services of their executive. "It's a win/win situation" says Don Jutton, "Commander in Chief" of the Municipal Minutemen. "Since we operate on a contractual basis, a city or town can tap into our expertise for any length of time with no need to jump through the bureaucratic hoops required for hiring or firing a regular employee."

In fact, MRI doesn't just fill vacancies - they fill needs. If a community needs additional services specific to a project or implementation of a new budgeting or accounting methodology or administration of a grant for a school, MRI provides them with a resource they can count on without having to increase their own internal bureaucracy.

## The Lebanon Example

The community of Lebanon, NH is one example of the effectiveness of MRIs model. For almost 12 years now Lebanon has been utilizing MRI to fill vacancies that develop from city manager to public works director and assessor. "In fact, Joe Lessard, who is Jutton's "silent" partner, a co-owner of MRI and a recognized expert in property tax assessing, was just finishing up an 18 month tour of duty as Lebanon's interim Tax Assessor as this article was being written." Often the task has been to provide a smooth landing from the vacancy and an opportunity for Lebanon to take a more deliberative

approach to filling the vacancy according to Len Jarvi, Finance Director for the City. "MRI fills an important niche for us at a time when our backs are against the wall," says Jarvi. "They know the language, the jargon and the job and they provide us with expertise that gives us breathing room. Without MRI we might be forced to accelerate the hiring process and that hurts organizational stability and often leads to mistakes from which it might take years to recover."

### **The Less Traveled Road – Seeing the Big Picture**

Even for those called into service in a traditional posting, MRI's growing senior government resource pool shares a common vision. To think outside the box; and, most important, to use their expertise and position within the community to "challenge and inspire communities to move toward better ways of delivering municipal services."

Key to this long-term innovative approach is President Don Jutton. Jutton brings a wealth of practical experience to the task. With experience in both the private sector (Kimball Chase Engineering) and the public sector including stints as Town Manager in Meredith, Littleton, Salem and Wakefield just for starters, Jutton is widely acknowledged as a Guru of Sustainable Community Economic Development.

One of the most compelling examples of Jutton's approach is the success of Littleton. (Ed's note: If you missed our recent feature Littleton – The Little Town That Could, you can find a reference to it at the bottom of this article) As Town Manager in Littleton, New Hampshire, Jutton challenged the town to consider and embrace innovative approaches that have led to collaborations and partnerships connecting all corners of the community including a combined Town/School District budgeting and annual meeting process. During this time Littleton was named Main Street Community of the Year, selected as one of the best school districts in the United States, negotiated a municipal partnership agreement with NASA's Stennis Space Center,

and was featured in an article titled "Old NH Town Catches Smart Growth Fever" in USA TODAY.

Jutton's talent is a rare combination of vision and practical understanding. Most important to the success of MRI and the communities with which they work, is that he is quite aware of his own strengths and weaknesses - in truth they are less weaknesses than areas for which his passion is cooler - and he makes up for the latter by surrounding himself with the talent to cover all the bases. MRI's list of associates is, for those knowledgeable of government, a veritable Who's Who of top notch folks: Wallace E. (Wally) Stickney, one of NH's most respected former commissioners of the NH Department of Transportation and former National Director of the Federal Emergency Management Agency under former President George H. W. Bush is Chairman of the Advisory Board of MRI; Pat McQueen, whose experience includes seventeen years as City Manager of Keene and past President of the highly regarded New Hampshire Municipal Association, as well as a Trustee from its inception of the Compensation Funds of New Hampshire; Carol Coppola who developed the Internal Controls Assessment system which the New Hampshire Municipal Association's Property/Liability Trust uses to evaluate the status of internal controls in the towns and school districts insured by the trust, hailed as a first-in-the-industry effort to improve anti-fraud and anti-waste efforts in municipal government. Don Bliss, former NH Fire Marshall and Homeland Security Advisor to both Governor Jeanne Shaheen and Governor Craig Benson; Bruce A. MacDougall who rose through the ranks from Dispatcher to Chief of the Methuen, Massachusetts Police Department, where he spent most of his law enforcement career; Michael H. Everngam who retired from school business administration in New Hampshire after 15 years of service to in the Oyster River Cooperative school district and SAU 51 (Alton-Barnstead-Pittsfield). These talented folks are only the tip of the MRI iceberg and with a business model based on flexibility, at any moment, Don Jutton is likely to reach out and bring in some

other highly respected icon to address an immediate problem or simply enhance the depth of MRI's capabilities.

"We have the skills within the company to do everything from walking in and running a small municipality to running specific agencies within a municipality. For example, right now we are providing complete tax assessment services for 20 different communities. Pat McQueen is on contract to the city of Berlin where he is the City Manager; and we are providing many other communities with individuals who are running public works departments, assessing office, school budget offices and compliance activities around every aspect of governance throughout the northeast and Pennsylvania."

As suggested above, Jutton's own passion lies in the challenge of innovative community economic development. His focal points are what the folks at MRI term their "Special Projects". And their special projects are where MRI's national reputation has largely been built. This is, of course completely understandable. After all, when you provide an individual to fill a vacancy within the existing structure of government, the goal is to create a virtually seamless transition. There are no spotlights or theme music playing the goal is to be virtually invisible to the outside world. Innovative community economic development on the other hand is a much higher profile undertaking - and most often a response to a deeper problem or community crisis.

### **The Berlin Example**

Kathy McDowell of Berlin chaired the Androscoggin Valley Economic Recovery Corporation from 2002 - 2004. She came on board in this position after the previous chairman had already hired MRI. Berlin has been in a state of economic crisis for nearly a generation in concert with the death throes of the paper industry in America. MRI was brought in to provide some "outside perspective and experience" according to McDowell.

"They (MRI) helped us give our situation some context to begin with," said Mc-

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Dowell, "we began to see clearly that Berlin wasn't the only city in this fix. Our group process improved because, as facilitator of the group, MRI had no axe to grind. They could give voice to all perspectives" – and there were plenty.

As is often the case in this sort of situation, most of the group was obsessively focused on job creation – often mistakenly presumed equate to economic development. But job creation doesn't happen when other fundamentals necessary to economic growth are not strong. "Don Jutton (MRI's Point man on this front) was able to get us to focus on the larger Community Development picture. He, more or less, got us to stop whining and start working on building community – which would then drive economic growth. Many of the things we discussed in those early days are now coming to fruition."

#### **A Change Agent**

"I'm more of a creative change agent than a sustainer" Jutton says. And his passion for the subject is downright infectious. In fact, despite the fact that he has built a company that is hugely successful at helping municipalities and school districts dot their i's and cross their T's, Jutton is most in his element when he is challenging community leaders to break down boundaries, fiefdoms and turf to achieve greater efficiency and effectiveness. "Why should three small communities within close proximity to one another each be bearing the cost of police protection or fire protection when they could join together and achieve better results for less?" Jutton says. "If two cities have inadequate high schools within 5 miles of one another, wouldn't it be better if they stopped worrying about losing their basketball team and started thinking about how they could create a first class education system together?"

#### **The Troy Example**

In the community of Troy, NH, MRI is working its creative side, but the relationship began with a simple operational



*Don Jutton*

project to do a search for a new police chief. In the middle of that modest project Troy faced an economic and environmental crisis with the closing of Troy Mills. Troy Mills, employing more than 600 people locally, had been a fixture within the community for generations. Like many similar operations in their early days they had simply buried their wastes on site. Their closing precipitated a confluence of crises. Fortunately, according to Donald Upton, a leading player in the efforts to address these twin crises, MRI was there to help. MRI helped set up the nonprofit Troy Development Corporation that assumed ownership of the property. They also helped Troy create a committee to go after Superfund money for the environmental cleanup. The net result has been an award of 8.1 million dollars for cleanup and a new developer, Robert Hansen, passionate about redeveloping the Troy Mills property. Today in Troy, according to Don Upton, hope is reborn; new people are moving to town; and there is a sense that their response to the crises will change the town forever in a positive way.

#### **The Vision Thing**

It's all about "The Vision Thing". Jutton's dream is of communities where children and education are not made the enemy because they are an easier target than bureaucrats and community leaders who stubbornly cling to outmoded and inefficient ways of delivering services; of communities where business leaders consider it a moral imperative to be involved; of communities where citizens are engaged at every possible level in the business of building social capital; of communi-

ties where civility is reborn; in short, of communities that work. In fact he has recently created a new foundation called the "Future Communities Corps" whose principle mission will be to encourage innovative thinking and efforts aimed at building sustainable communities.

"Posterity still matters," says Jutton. "But for many people, the imperative of it has become less clear. Our parents generation had a much more defined sense of the importance of the future. In part it is because they paid a much higher price during their lifetimes to secure the present than we have. We desperately need to re-instill a sense of the importance of posterity and to create a resurgence of civility in the public dialogue."

"For all of us here, this is much more about Community Service than work."