‘Have enough lined up:’ Municipal interns can fill critical needs

More Maine students apply for internships with the state, cities and towns than are awarded. Faced with a labor shortage, local leaders may want to think about that.

By Janine Pineo

If you could sit yourself down for 40 hours a week, what could you get done?”

Jay Feyler, Union town manager, has had three years – and three interns – to test this question and get quantifiable results. “It’s just amazing the quality and intelligence of these young people,” he said. “You can have your interns do stuff that never gets done in years.”

Not only does it give management a fresh perspective, Feyler said he has learned how much work can be accomplished by an individual not being pulled in a dozen different directions, but devoted to specific tasks 40 hours a week.

“They get stuff done really fast,” he said. His advice for any manager planning for an intern? “Make sure you have enough lined up.”

Feyler did not seek interns via his own hiring process in Union. Larger municipalities with human resource departments can and do, but advertising and interviewing applicants, if you get any, requires time, something that smaller municipalities often lack because of the size of their office staff.

What Feyler did was create a job description and outline projects as part of his application to the Maine Government Summer Internship Program administered by the Margaret Chase Smith Policy Center at the University of Maine. The program was established in 1967 by the Legislature, specifically to offer students a chance to gain experience in state government as legislative interns.

It wasn’t until 2006 that local and county government internships were added to the program, but there was no funding attached, nor was there direction on how to organize an administrative structure, according to Peggy McKee, director of the internship program. The Maine Town, City and County Management Association agreed to disseminate information to membership, according to McKee, and the Maine Municipal Association agreed to include information in the Maine Townsman magazine, but it wouldn’t be until 2013 that things began to take shape.

“I think there’s been a growing recognition that the work force is aging,” McKee said. That has led to a conscious effort to build up interest in municipal government.

“In 2013, we worked out a process and shared the program information,” according to McKee. “The first municipal internship through our program was in 2014. The program has expanded every year since.”

The internship is a full-time, paid job for 12 weeks in the summer. Eligible students either have to be enrolled in a Maine college or be a Maine resident enrolled in college elsewhere, and they must have completed successfully a minimum of two years of college. All majors are eligible to apply.

Interested municipalities also have to apply, outlining the job for the intern and budgeting the funds to pay the required salary. In 2018, that was $11 per hour.

Need more municipalities

Once applications are in, the process falls on the selection committee, which seeks to match the needs listed by the government applicants to the skill sets of the student applicants. According to McKee, 215 students applied to the overall program in 2018, with 57 offered internships, of which 14 were to municipalities.

“There were a lot of applicants we
Rodger Heidgerken

Rodger Heidgerken couldn’t place,” said Feyler, who is the municipal representative on the selection committee. “Too many kids, not enough towns.”

His goal is to see the number of interns double. “We’ve really been promoting it,” he said.

Two first-time participants this year were Bowdoinham and Rumford, with both town managers singing the praises of their interns and the program.

“I can’t say enough about the program,” said William Post, Bowdoinham’s town manager. “I didn’t know what to expect. I was cautiously optimistic.”

Post said he sat down with his planning and development director to plot out a project list and make sure that the work planned would be valuable. “I knew I was going to have an intern because I knew I could find the money for it,” he said. Bowdoinham also won one of three $1,500 grants from a Maine Municipal Association program. “It’s going to benefit us for years to come,” he said.

Heidgerken also attended meetings of the select board and planning board. “This was easily the best part of the internship,” he wrote in his final synopsis. “I love feeling like my work made an impact on people, and this is the easiest way to learn that.”

**Assistance in Rumford**

In Rumford, the town was in the midst of executing a critical infrastructure project in the downtown that would replace water, sewer and storm runoff systems, along with sidewalks and other improvements. “This is not a typical Main Street project,” said Town Manager Linda-Jean Briggs. “It’s a huge undertaking here in Rumford.”

Briggs decided the $5 million Island Project could use an intern as a communications assistant who would help not only with the necessary communication between the town and businesses but also with financial aspects of the project. The intern was responsible for all of the grant and loan paperwork, Briggs said, and also

Interested city and town officials are encouraged to contact Peggy McKee at the Margaret Chase Smith Policy Center (207-581-1644 or margaret.mckee@maine.edu) prior to applying the first time. “If it isn’t someone we’ve worked with before, it helps to talk with them early,” she said. McKee and Union Town Manager Jay Feyler also recommend getting advice from someone who has had an intern before as the municipality plans its internship.

Victoria Forkus

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set up a process for administering the money.

Rumford’s intern was Victoria Forkus, a resident of Bryant Pond who just got her master’s degree from the University College of Dublin in Ireland.

Briggs estimated that Forkus spent about half her internship working on the project. “She would walk the island and introduce herself,” Briggs said. “She was very visible. She got a standing ovation when she was leaving.”

She added, “Without her, I think we would have had a lot more problems.”

For Forkus, the experience opened her eyes to employment possibilities she hadn’t seen before. “Local government has more of an impact… than state or federal,” she said. She had been applying for state and federal jobs, but as her internship progressed, Briggs encouraged her to consider municipal work.

“I was really open for anything,” Forkus said. “The most important thing was being able to remain in Maine. It’s cliché, but when you spend time away from Maine, you want to stay here.”

She was told “just apply and see what happens.” Forkus did, and in early October, she started work as Jackman’s new town manager.

“The experience is exactly what the program wants,” Briggs said. She “absolutely” will have another intern, with the focus possibly on mapping cemeteries or working in the highway department.
More plans for Union

Fevler is hoping this year’s intern, Patrick Groening of Belfast, will return next year to finish the job on mapping Union’s cemeteries. He has another project in mind, too, which would involve the town’s website and social media to attract younger folk to become more involved and informed. “We have a hard time getting volunteers for anything,” he said.

McKee, the internship program’s director, said the program is a learning experience for both intern and administrator. “There’s really a void in student awareness,” she said. “Most of them come back and say I had no idea.”

For administrators, she said, “it’s sometimes just having this injection of new energy and different perspective.”

The most common issue for students is time management, McKee said. They need to speak up and ask for more to do. “Student interns can generally accomplish more than people think they can,” she said.

Administrators regularly find they don’t have enough for the intern to do. “It works out better when the supervisor can identify major projects,” McKee said. Across the board, managers need to design bigger projects for their intern.

While state-level internships tend to be less varied, McKee said, the same is not true for municipalities, which require a variety of skill sets depending on the department. At town level, if the student isn’t interested in a project, you can probably come up with other things they can do. “The town has the flexibility to change,” she said.

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