Q&A with Hartland's new Town Manager

By Aaron Rubin
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John Broker-Campbell, a seasoned public servant with experience at the state, regional, and local levels, is the new Town Manager of Hartland. Broker-Campbell will fill the role that was left by former Town Manager David Ormiston, who resigned in May 2023. Broker-Campbell began his tenure on Feb. 5, and while he is still settling into his new position, he is excited to learn more about the Hartland community and fulfill the projects on the town's docket.

On Monday, Broker-Campbell, 44, spoke with the Standard to talk about his past experiences in various government bodies, how they will inform his new role as Town Manager, and the importance of maintaining a work-life balance to support overall success.

Q: Considering your background — you are a Michigan native and a graduate of the University of Wisconsin-Green Bay — what brought you from the Great Lakes to the Upper Valley?

A: [My wife I] were living in Green Bay at the time I graduated, we had just gotten married, and we were kind of untethered and looking for something different. I was applying for jobs really across the country and we ended up in Ascutney of all places. I wouldn't say we were looking to come to New England, but we're very happy that we ended up here. We moved here the week between Christmas and New Year's of 2007-2008.

Q: That is when you joined what is now called the Mount Ascutney Regional Commission?

A: My first day there was probably January 2, 2008. We lived in Springfield for a bit but mostly in Weathersfield until we moved to Alaska, which was early fall of 2014.

Q: What were you doing in Alaska?

A: I took a job doing emergency planning and a joint partnership rule with the city and borough of Juneau and the University of Alaska Southeast… We're very happy we went. It was a worthwhile experience. What really drove us [back to Vermont] was when we found out we were having a baby. We were 3,000 miles away from anywhere, from anything that we knew. All of our families [are] in the Midwest and all of the friends we had gotten to know over the past seven years were here in New England.

Q: How did you find out about this Town Manager role in Hartland?

A: I had seen it posted in the summer, but at the time there were a lot of life things happening, in addition to the statewide flood. When it got reposted, moving into that town manager role is something that had kind of been, I would say, percolating in the back of my mind for a while as a next logical step. We're very settled in Weathersfield — we wanted to be here — moving wasn't on the table. Hartland is a nice commute from Weathersfield. We've been [to Hartland] for events in the past, the Fourth of July celebration and things like that. There's always been a nice kind of community-centric vibe to the town, so I was excited to be a part of Hartland.

Q: You were previously the southern region floodplain manager for the Vermont Department of Environmental Conservation, you have your regional experience with the Mount Ascutney Regional Commission and in Alaska, and you also served as Weathersfield's Town Moderator. How have you planned on taking your wide range of public service experiences into this new role, where you will be overseeing town departments and services?

A: I think all of those different positions have really prepped me to be the Town Manager in Hartland. There's little bits and pieces that you learned from along the way… Hartland is smaller Vermont; we have the same issues that face the state of Vermont. Hartland is not all Upper Valley commuters, it's not all rural dairy farmers, it is an amalgamation of all those things, and it's what makes Vermont great. That's why we chose to come back here, because you have this real broad base for the community. Our son is in the Weathersfield School, the diversity amongst his friends is really wonderful, like their backgrounds and their upbringings. That's really nice to have, and to be able to bring those different experiences that I've learned in each one of those positions and the different points of view that I've learned along the way, and bringing them to Hartland I think is going to really, hopefully, serve me and the town well in the years to come.

When I was working for the State of Vermont, a lot of what I did was relationship building, and I think that is directly applicable in the town of Hartland as well. It's not just me sitting in the office with the door closed, but it's being part of the community and I really look forward to that. That's what I like to do.

Q: That's an essential element for your role as Town Manager, collaboration, teamwork, etc.?

A: Exactly. Not just within town departments and town staff but across the community.

Q: How did your role as Weathersfield's Town Moderator and its responsibilities inform your understanding of local politics and its citizen body, especially as practiced in that traditional, New England style?

A: Being a moderator, you're there to keep the meeting on the rails. But largely, it's been a very interesting learning experience watching the selectboards and school boards present their information and field the questions from the floor. Listening to how the different boards speak to the town, you can visually see how people respond to different types of presentations and different levels of information. I was able to participate, but also being the moderator you have a unique perspective of being able to watch both the board and the audience.

I believe in public service; being a part of the community that you live in, and whether it's through volunteer action on boards or commissions or PTO at the school, whatever it might be, being a part of the community, that's what makes Vermont unique. It's how you get to know your neighbors and how we all thrive here. Being Town Moderator is not something that a lot of people volunteer to do, but I don't mind the public speaking component of it. I enjoy town meetings, I think a uniquely Vermont thing, and I was excited to be a part of it.

Q: Looking to the future, what are some of the challenges, issues, or projects that you and the town are facing for 2024?

A: We have a couple of large outstanding projects we hope to be able to bring across the finish line in the coming months...Thinking of some of the ongoing projects, I'm stepping in at the 80 percent line, if you will, so a lot of what I'm doing is trying to get up to speed and then working with the people who were shepherding these projects along the way for the past year and a half, collaborating with them to bring the projects to completion. There was a big intersection project in town that's been ongoing for a long time.

Q: What do you like the most about your role so far?

A**:** I like that every day is unique. I like getting to know the community, getting to know the town folks who pop into my office, going to meet the library staff and the highway department staff. It's exciting to start a month before town meeting, just enough to get going a little bit, and then you have this, again, uniquely Vermont experience with Town Meeting and then you get to meet everybody who shows up.

Q: Turning to non-work related matters, tell me a little bit about your family and your interests and hobbies. Maybe where you could be spotted on a Saturday afternoon?

A: My wife and I have an eight-year-old son who goes to the Weathersfield School, he's in second grade. It keeps us pretty busy. There's a lot of soccer practices and basketball games and a never ending stream of other things, playdates and things like that along the way. So when there's time and depending on the season, I'm a fairly avid mountain biker. I'm generally relatively outdoorsy, so biking, cross country skiing, that type of stuff. You might spot me running around town at lunchtime going for a run, too.

Q: Do you find that being active and also having the responsibilities you have as a town manager that there needs to be a balance established between those two?

A: There absolutely needs to be a balance. From day one, setting aside a dedicated times, like from 11:30 a.m. to 12 p.m., I'm going to step out of the office for a half hour-whether I'm going to go for a run, I'm gonna go for a walk I might go shoot baskets at the Rec Center for a half hour in the summertime, a mental break in the middle of the day — striving for that work-life balance is really important and I think really healthy. Scientists have said it— there's a lot of benefits of a little bit of sunlight.