

SUSAN LESSARD:

a multi-town dynamo

By Anne Gabbianelli

On May 12, 2019, Susan Lessard wrote on her Facebook page of conquering a bucket list item, earning her Bachelor's degree. What makes this accomplishment so unique is it took Lessard 40-plus years to find the time to complete this task. As she wrote, "I have managed five incredible communities, served as the president of the State Municipal Association, and on the Board of Environmental Protection—with a whole lot of other wonderful opportunities in between." The "whole lot more" even including being a lighthouse keeper on Vinalhaven.

Today, Bucksport's Town Manager credits family as the cornerstone of her successes, right up to earning her Bachelor of University Studies from the University of Maine. She said, "I have two amazing sons, and when I think of my children and what they have given me in my life, my heart feels too big for my chest."

However, what Lessard has offered communities and the state overall can be considered amazing. She has been at the helm of municipalities during tumultuous times and claimed, "Every community has challenges, but I have really always approached my work through the lens of opportunity. I am not Pollyanna, but I truly believe in the goodness of most people."

Lessard was a single parent when

she hit the books, so to speak, in Searsport, as a clerk and bookkeeper. Then in 1986, she became Town Manager of Livermore Falls. "Livermore Falls had a paper mill strike that caused division and heartbreak in the community, but it also had people working really hard to keep things together in a time when families were at war with each other," Lessard noted.

Then it was on to the Town of Fayette. Lessard recalled, "Fayette had what amounted to a governmental overthrow, and they just needed someone to put the wheels on the bus and get them set up to be able to move forward."

Heading offshore to be the Town Manager of Vinalhaven was next. "I lived in and cared for Brown's Head Lighthouse as part of my contract." She went on, "There was no such thing as a 'normal' way to do anything. It was an incredible education for me. Ever since my time there, I have always looked for new and innovative ways to solve challenges."

In her even-tempered, tenacious style, Lessard accepted more challenges during her 15 years as Hampden's town manager. "When I went to Hampden, they were entrenched in a many-year struggle over the local commercial landfill . . . Wrestling that to the ground took a huge amount of my time. But in the end, we negotiated the closure of the first commercial

landfill in the state and netted nearly \$10 million in host community benefit in the process," recalled Lessard.

When Lessard left Hampden, she had planned on interim work in communities in transition, which landed her in Bucksport. Soon, this resolution-driven powerhouse was immersed in a juggling act as the permanent town manager. "When I came to Bucksport, they had had three managers in four years, and the paper mill had closed, costing 40 percent of property valuation," said Lessard. Under her leadership in the last five years, Bucksport has become home to a redeveloped paper mill housing Maine Maritime Academy's training facility, Whole Oceans' land-based salmon farm, and an Ironclad Energy power plant.

As in Hampden, because of the camaraderie Lessard evokes, the Penobscot River community of 4,900 is appreciating a lively Main Street, half a million dollars in grants, and a \$35,000 engineering grant for replacement of the town dock. Looking to Bucksport's future, Lessard said, "I get goosebumps." She contended, "The toughest times have generally brought out the very best in the majority of people that I have had the good fortune to work with. I am so very proud of the work we have done here."

When the COVID-19 pandemic hit



Maine and all its communities, Lessard got to work with a plan called “Bucksport Pay it Forward.” Deputy Mayor Paul Bissonnette said he wasn’t surprised with Lessard’s food voucher and small business grants idea. “Susan puts the needs of the entire town first. What she did particularly well, I think, is to communicate the need and rationale,” he said. “She presented this as a ‘bridge’ program to help people now, until aid from the federal and state levels could kick in—a pragmatic approach that I have often seen from her.”

Lessard’s notable successes are not only at the municipal level but have had statewide impact. She has served on the Board of Environmental Protection since 2007. “I chaired the Holtra Chem Manufacturing hearings that resulted in the land-based cleanup of that site [in Orrington],” she said. In addition, Lessard heard

the appeals of many wind power projects in Maine and participated in rulemaking related to BPA and other toxic chemical issues. She also worked on LNG proposed projects in Downeast Maine, and currently she is engaged in the licensure process of the Nordic Aquaculture salmon farm in Belfast.

One does not achieve such accomplishments and go unnoticed. In 1998, Lessard was awarded a Coast Guard Commendation for her role on the Maine Lights Committee that decided the fate of 35 Maine Lighthouses. She received the Leadership Award from the Maine Town & City Managers Association in 1999 for a landfill closure plan on Vinalhaven that also won national awards for innovative design.

She won the engineering excellence award from the State of Maine in 2001 for the Landfill Review

Committee established in Hampden. An award also came from the Maine Ferry Service Advisory Board in 2000 for work done on establishing a long-term plan for the ferry service. Most recently she won an award from the Maine Development Foundation for accomplishments in Bucksport.

After all this, it is hard to imagine this energetic woman actually has a home life. But she does! She and her husband Dan Bartlett, a retired Coast Guard Senior Chief, live in Bucksport, and their summer getaways involve hopping aboard their boat and visiting Lessard’s two sons, Bartlett’s two daughters, and six grandchildren.

It is clear that Lessard loves the tasks and challenges in all her roles. “Even though sometimes it has been difficult, I don’t have an end date for this work. I have always said, when I don’t love it anymore, I won’t do it anymore.”

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