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HUDSON

New manager to change Hudson's 'no rules' culture

Catherine Haulard, was named general manager of Hudson Sept. 3.



Photo credit: Frederic Hore/THE GAZETTE

Jason Magder | From The Gazette | September 16, 2013

Hudson's new general manager says she can see clearly how a payroll and tax collection scandal was able to go unnoticed in the town for many years.

"There were no internal controls," said Catherine Haulard, 48, who was named officially to the post on Sept. 3, after starting on the job Aug. 26.

Haulard takes over for Louise Villandré, who retired in April after 43 years as both clerk and manager. After she retired, it was discovered the town had misappropriated funds in its payroll system. Furthermore, an audit of the town's finances discovered 315 taxpayers owed taxes dating as far back as 2004, for a total of \$1.2 million.

"I'm setting up all the internal controls for purchasing, and taxation. There was never any process of collection before."

Haulard, whose previous job was manager of the town of Ste-Marcelline-de-Kildare, a small town 20 minutes north of Joliette, doesn't mince words when talking about the previous administration. She said there were no rules in place.

"We're supposed to have a bylaw that sets the rules for budgetary process and controls. That's the law, but if there is one, I don't have it," said Haulard, sitting at the conference table of the town's Halcro House, near the new fire hall. "Council needs to approve all expenses."

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She said that's not to say employees acted improperly in the past, but all expenses in a town are generally approved either by the manager or the elected council, which was not the case in Hudson.

She said she will implement strict rules, and relies on town workers to get behind the new system.

"Employees are so used to doing things a certain way with no leadership, and nobody telling them anything or working with them," she said. "They were left on their own. I'm not saying their decisions were not right."

Haulard said she sent the message out that all expenses must now be accounted for, and she's confident the old way of doing things has stopped. The controls she intends to put in place will make sure of that, she said.

"It's not normal that an employee can turn around and spend \$2,000, without even an explanation," she said. "Everything will have to pass through city council."

With a Sûreté du Québec investigation under way into how the town managed its finances, Haulard said she's not concerned about an air of suspicion hanging around Hudson's administration.

"I don't feel responsible for the past," she said. "I think people are expecting me to act with integrity, not doubting me."

Haulard said more than getting a handle on the expenditure process, her greatest challenge will be to improve the morale of the town's employees and get them working as a team.

"(Morale) was very low when I came in. I'm seeing an improvement because I'm taking the time to be present and to listen to them," she said.

She added from what she has been told, the previous manager didn't take a lot of time to speak with town employees, and when they had concerns, or discovered irregularities, they were ignored. Haulard said she has already met most employees and told them she's available any time they need to speak to her.

"We have a good team," she said. "It's up to me to show them the right thing to do. We have to reinvent ourselves."

Haulard was born in Montreal, but she moved with her parents back to their native country of Spain in the 1970s to flee the FLQ crisis. She attended elementary and high school in Denia, Spain, before moving back to Montreal for university.

She worked as an accountant and a financial analyst in the private sector for several firms, including the technology company Brother.

Haulard took the job in Hudson so she could live in closer proximity to her aging mother, who lives in Montreal.

For the next few months, however, she'll still be commuting about an hour from Ste-Marcelline-de-Kildare, where she still lives.

She's looking for a house in the area, but said she likely won't find one until the spring.

jmagder@montrealgazette.com

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