

TOWN ADMINISTRATOR WORKGROUP
May 1, 2023, AT 3:00 P.M.
COUNCIL CHAMBER, NEWTOWN MUNICIPAL CENTER
3 PRIMROSE STREET, NEWTOWN, CT

These minutes are subject to approval by the Work Group

MINUTES

PRESENT: Pat Llodra, Bill Brimmer, Ned Simpson and Maureen Crick Owen

ALSO PRESENT: One voter

The meeting was called to order at 3:00 p.m. by chair Mrs. Crick Owen.

VOTER COMMENTS – None

ACCEPTANCE OF MINUTES

Mr. Brimmer moved to approve the minutes of April 17, 2023. Mrs. Crick Owen seconded. Mr Simpson who was absent at that meeting abstained, Motion passes.

DISCUSSION WITH FAIRFIELD

First Selectman Brenda Kupchick, Chief Administrator Officer Tom Bremer and Chief of Staff Jackie Bertolone

Recording available at:

https://drive.google.com/file/d/1rPQ0Rb3uMqlg4qwDg-clEH1gut_vyKEI/view?usp=sharing

Fairfield is a town of about 61,000 with an annual town budget of \$300 million. There are 18 departments with 500 full-time employees. Governance is through a Representative Town Meeting (RTM) structure. The First Selectmen, who is in her second two-year term has a Chief Administrative Officer (CAO) and a Chief of Staff (CoS). The CAO role was created when the First Selectman was elected. Both the CAO and CoS are at-will employees. An in-depth charter revision was undertaken this year to reflect the CAO role, codifying the CoS role and other changes. Input and support from state resources and universities was looked at to identify the best approach for Fairfield's governance. It was noted was that for towns with Town Managers when a council party majority turned over, they would often fire the Town Manager, In Fairfield, the CoS position had become a political football. The charter revision did not pass.

Replying to a question about who residents talk to. Mrs. Kupchick indicated that the town has one full time and a half time person answering calls. They direct the calls to the department that is best able to respond, if it rises to a level where the person wants to speak to the First Selectman, 9 times out of 10 she will talk to them. Fairfield faced a contamination issue. One person was designated to handle all aspects of that issue, lawyers, EPA, the criminal matter. CAO was the First Selectman's liaison to those meetings.

The HR department includes five people. In the past, the most qualified person was not necessarily the HR director. The incumbent was released in the first 60 days of the Mrs. Kupchick term. Also, during that time, an extensive review was conducted of town positions and a reorganization was put in place. This review showed that HR was underwater and needed more professionals. From the HR department, escalation next goes to the CoS.

Regarding the organization chart (Attachment A) Mrs. Llodra asked about shared responsibility of CoS and COA. Mrs. Kupchick indicated that which person is involved tends to be issue related and the responsibility and expertise of either the CoS or CAO. Regular staff meetings include: First Selectman, CoS, CAO, CFO, Town Attorney, and HR director. As an example of expertise driving who handles a department's issue, Mr Bremer handles all purchasing, including schools, which is a major time consumer. In Fairfield the town has responsibility over the Board of Education, their budget and their purchases.

Mrs. Crick Owen asked what they consider the benefits of a Town Administrator model? Mrs. Kupchick identified the political nature of a three person Board of Selectman and her desire to transition the RTM to a town council. She likes elected official models. She knows from other towns that councils politicalize the Town Manager. There was a discussion of Town Manager/Town Administrator living in the town. Mrs. Kupchick reflected on the electorate choosing the leader with the leader provided sufficient staff to manage the town. Recognizing that any elected leader is required to do things such as ribbon cuttings, carries a need to have people back doing the day to day things.

Mr Simpson, referring to what we learned of Wilton's justification for the Town Administrator that enables the First Selectman to spend more time regionally and in Hartford. Mrs. Kupchick stated that was not the case for her. What is enabled is more time listening and learn from Fairfield residents.

Regarding roles and responsibilities, Mrs. Bertolone acknowledged that there is overlap, but with extensive daily communications it is working. Mr Bremer characterized the roles as CoS being more external, legal and media, while CAO is more internal.

Mr Brimmer asked how department heads reacted to change, Mr Bremer indicated that department heads trust CAO and CoS to carry their issues forward. Mrs. Bertolone said that department heads are happier with the new structure.

Mr Bremer was CoS for 10 years. He has seen tremendous change. Now there is much more public engagement, and social media. The First Selectman pulled in so many directions. He thinks very few people outside of municipal operations understand the pressures.

Regarding desirable attributes for the administrative roles, Mr Bremer replied, being a lawyer is not required, but management experience is an absolute must. Mrs. Bertolone added that 100% trust of the First Selectman, understanding of municipal government and being an extension of the First Selectman. Both feel living in town is very important.

DISCUSSION WITH MANCHESTER

Mayor Jay Moran and Town Manager Steve Stephano of Manchester

Recording available at:

https://drive.google.com/file/d/1Sj7dSLJeSnPsIVA892Ggr9_rDBOVtA3/view?usp=s

Since 1952, the Town of Manchester has been organized under the Council-Manager form of government. The highest vote getter in the biennial Board of Directors election is Mayor. By majority vote, the Board of Directors appoints the Town Manager. Starting in 2023, there will be a direct election of Mayor. Mayor receives \$3,000 per year. Town Manager Steve Stephano, born, raised and lives in Manchester, was appointed Town Manager upon the retirement of his predecessor after serving as Assistant Town Manager for three years. In the past 70 years there have been seven Town Managers. Manchester was fortunate in having on Town Manager that served for 29 years and one for 15 years. The town has about 500 full time permanent employees with 300 to 500 part time and seasonal employees.

Mr Moran described the Town Manager role as overseeing all department and day to day operations. The Town Manager is basically the CEO and the Mayor is the CFO/Chief Elected Official. Mr Stephano characterized the Mayor/Town Board as determining what to do and Town Manager determining how to do and manages it. Implementing the voice of the community through the Board. Mr Moran indicated that the responsibility of the Mayor/Board is to adopt a budget and hire/evaluate the Town Manager. With strategic direction set through the budget

The structure has worked well especially over the past decade with closing and renovating schools, a new library and enhancement to parks and infrastructure. Mr Stephano observed the larger cities, for example Hartford had more political influences and interest in accountability to voters under a Strong Mayor model.

Regarding the relationship between Town Manager and the Board/Mayor. Mr Stephano indicated that when hired there was a strategic review, but there has not been formal annual reviews. The importance of a Town Manager being a resident of the town they serve was discussed. The importance of trust in the Mayor – Town Manager relationship was emphasized.

Mr Stephano talked about the dynamics for department heads who face leadership turnover every two to four years. It makes them behave more politically rather than fiscally and operationally. Manchester has four dedicated staff in HR. The Assistant Town Manager oversees HR. HR also takes a lot of Mr Stephano's time particularly union relations and negotiations.

Other areas where Mr Stephano spends significant time include: employee recruitment, budget and finance as well as strategic issues. These include what's the town going to look like in 2030, are steps being taken to adopt to an increasingly more dynamic world, AI, and new technology, public relations and generally thinking ahead. In addition, as they occur, dealing with crises. Mr Stephano indicated that purchasing is not a big time consumer for him. The finance department has a three person purchasing division.

For the Board of Education, the only interplay with the Town Manager comes through the Board allocating money and approving major grants. The management of the BOE lies with the Superintendent. There is a \$100 million program which started in 2015, involving a school consolidation and the renovation of all schools. Construction management and facilities are Town Manager responsibilities. There was a review that recognized excess capacity in elementary schools and the need for more contemporary capabilities in their schools.

Mr Moran identified to key areas: make sure you have the right people. And keep politics out of the Town Manage position. Pay attention to department heads. It comes down to personalities. A lot of give and take. Elected officials have to trust their Town Manager.

In closing Mr Stephano pointed the Newtown work group to the ICMA for resources related to choosing a Town Manager form of government.

OLD BUSINESS

Draft document re: why possible executive structure change

Mrs. Crick Owen reminded the Work Group that this will be a discussion item for many upcoming meetings as we refine the content. Mrs. Crick Owen and Mr Brimmer annotations on the draft had been circulated to the Work Group. Mrs. Crick Owen started with a big picture comment that while she doesn't disagree that politics plays a role in town governance, any reference to politics should come out of the document. The focus should be what has changed for the Newtown First Selectman, and things have changed a lot. The Work Group is trying to be non-political.

Mrs. Llodra suggested working through the document sequentially. Starting with the "Current Governance Structure", she felt it was a good summary. She offered two clarifications: all, not most town bodies have a form of Minority Representation, and all elected bodies should be listed. In the "Recent History" section, the sentence about department head tenure needs work.

In agreeing that there shouldn't be reference to politics Mrs. Llodra supported the reference to increased density of the role. The work is too big for one person. Regarding the question of added expense, percentage wise it is a very small percentage change. A large impact for a small investment. After discussion of density, Mrs. Llodra volunteered to work on drafting sample bullets to be included.

NEW BUSINESS

1. Next Steps

Mrs. Crick Owen reported on progress in scheduling reference towns to meet with the Work Group. Next meeting May 15 will be held at 5:00 pm with a public hearing starting at 6:00 pm. The schedule of reference town meetings now runs through June 26. When first formed last January, the Work Group thought it would wrap-up it's work by June. That will not happen.

2. Assignment of Tasks

Mr Simpson suggested that in light of the extended time frame, now might be a good time to start documenting highlights of what we have heard. Work Group members have been flagging important points in their notes. The Work Group will not be writing job descriptions or going into greater detail. The expectation is a one-page recommendation and many pages of supporting information.

Encourage participation in the public hearing.

VOTER COMMENTS

Wes Thompson, Newtown, made the observation that after listening to a number of Work Group meetings, there are some common themes: too much work for one individual, continuity risks if there isn't a Town Administrator or Town Manager, complexity, and density of the role has increased, and it is a 24/7 job.

Mr. Brimmer moved to adjournment. Mr Simpson seconded. All in favor, motion passes. The meeting was adjourned at 5:00 p.m.

Respectfully submitted,
Ned Simpson

Attachment A – Fairfield, CT Organization Chart

