

TOWN of NEWTOWN
TOWN ADMINISTRATOR WORK GROUP
SPECIAL MEETING, MARCH 13, 2023
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 member of the press

The meeting was called to order at 1:33 p.m. by Mrs. Crick Owen.

VOTER COMMENTS – None

ACCEPTANCE OF MINUTES

Mr. Brimmer moved to approve the minutes of March 6, 2023. Mrs. Llodra seconded. All in favor and motion passes.

Three current and former Newtown department heads were invited to the Work Group Meeting. Prior to the meeting they were provided a set of nine questions.

DISCUSSION WITH RETIRED NEWTOWN DIRECTOR OF LAND USE & PLANNING
GEORGE BENSON

1. How many first selectmen have you worked for?
Worked for the town 18 years under four different First Selectman
2. What are your biggest challenges when there is a new First Selectman?
There are a lot of details. There is a learning curve, even though the new First Selectman may have had town experience it takes a while to learn what every department does. It's been smooth because we have good department staff.
3. What are your biggest opportunities when there is a new First Selectman?
Maybe get some initiatives through that didn't move in the past. But there haven't been big changes. We've been lucky with capable First Selectman serving multiple terms. That could change in the future. We've been lucky to get First Selectmen that know the town. Changes have more to do with grants and law suits than day to day. Planning and zoning is controlled by the Planning and Zoning Commission and the department.
4. When there is a new First Selectman, does the culture change or remain the same among town employees?
There is initial apprehension of the unknown. Not a lot of change has happened. Town has been very lucky with the First Selectmen that have been elected for their experience, personnel management skill, and longevity. First selectmen are know about town.
5. Do you feel your goals for your department are impacted (positive or negative) when there is a new First Selectman?

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It depends. Tends to relate to the Capital Improvement Plan (CIP.) Might be change in the priority list. No wholesale changes. Again, having had First Selectman that know the town. One change was Dan Rosenthal's focus on Fairfield Hills

6. When there is a new First Selectman, how does this affect your preparing the budget or CIP? Do you tailor your requests and presentations with that person in mind?

Budgets have been steady over the years. Priority of CIP bigger projects has changed. Mr Brimmer asked if a new First Selectmen had a difference in view of the CIP, would that influence you. Mr Benson replies absolutely yes. Changes haven't been negative. It's been a matter of prioritizing.

7. If there was a Town Administrator or Town Manager, do you think communication and teamwork would improve, remain the same or be less?

Backing up, Mr Benson stated again how lucky the town has been with First Selectman. Prior to working for Newtown, Mr Benson worked at Brookfield. At that time there was a new First Selectman every two years who imposed changes down to operations. He cited this as a reason Mr Benson took the job in Newtown. He has always had the fear that Newtown would get into a similar position. Don't know what you are going to get in First Selectman.

Mr Benson has always thought it would be good to have a Town Administrator or Town Manager for the continuity. He would however be less disposed to a Town Manager as it requires charter changes and there are state statutes that address aspects of the job that may not fit Newtown. There are financial and personnel aspects. Mr Benson would emphasize the personnel side and dealing with unions and department managers. Those with corporate experience tend to lack skills dealing with people and the public. Municipal operations are not profit and loss driven. Town Administrator is better because it can be tailored to Newtown. Responding to a question from Mrs Llodra about political impact of Town Administrator vs Town Manager, Mr Benson suggested the Town Administrator should be under a three year contract to ensure overlap. Some type of a contract would be key. Contract should protect against an at will change by a new First Selectman.

8. In your opinion, what do you think would be the strengths and weaknesses of changing the town executive structure?

Would help with the personnel in town. Fortunately, we haven't had the situation, but we could get into the situation of every 2 years a changes. It would add a layer of experience and continuity. Times when the First Selectman is too busy, there would be a lot more weight to a Town Administrator or Town Manager calling rather than a department head. There have been a lot of things where the First Selectman has been drawn away. Newtown has had a good core of department managers, but that's something we won't have forever. Managers have stayed a long time with the town, but the younger generation, they don't tend to stay in jobs anymore. Mrs Llodra gave the Hawleyville, railroad, and water lines as issues that went across First Selectman terms. For these and other issues, Mr Benson represented the town on occasions that the First Selectman had conflicts.

Mr Brimmer poised a scenario of a Town Administrator to ask about department head reaction to being a layer away from the First Selectman. Mr Benson responded that it would be like getting a new First Selectman. Department Heads want to be dealing with the person that controls the outcome. He would hope that a Town Administrator would have a lot of municipal experience, not so much business experience. Have to have people who serve the people. We don't make a profit. There have been people that thought that departments should bring in enough revenue to cover the cost of staff. Staff was cut back the public wasn't served. Mr Brimmer pointed out that it is like a new CEO who brings in new ideas. The voters voted in for new ideas. Town staff has to be flexible. Mr Benson agreed.

Mrs Llodra asked about voter questioning the value of adding another position to the town budget. Mr Benson agreed that it is a major important question. Moving back to the original question Mr

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Benson feels the Town Administrator would manage the day-to-day operation while the First Selectman addresses meeting people, policy, and direction they were elected for. Mr Benson used the amount of time Mrs Llodra spent in construction trailers rather than being out in the town. He also highlighted how exceptionally lucky the town was to have Bob Mitchel, volunteer chair of Public Building and Sight Commission who gave seeming full time to the town. We will never get another Bob Mitchel. Mr Benson highlighted that across the country we are not getting the volunteers that we used to. Mr Simpson referred to the technology changes over the past 18 years and asked if the town has kept up and taken advantage of new technology. Mr Benson felt that a Town Administrator would help. Technical infrastructure is an area that needs long term focus to make change. A lot of projects take a long time. Mr Simpson asked for clarification on earlier comments as to Town Administrator taking direction from the First Selectman visa vie the value of someone seeped in the day-to-day identifying needs and opportunities pushing back in some areas. Mr Benson agreed that that is another reason for a Town Administrator

9. Should it change to Town Administrator or Town Manager? A lot of towns do not have a set of good department managers who stay in the job.
Town Administrator is a good concept worth taking the effort to look at.

DISCUSSION WITH NEWTOWN PUBLIC WORKS DIRECTOR FRED HURLEY

1. How many first selectmen have you worked for?
In 34 years working for Newtown, Fred has worked for seven First Selectman
2. What are your biggest challenges when there is a new First Selectman?
One has to interpret the priorities of the new First Selectman. What Mr Hurley has said to every First Selectman is: Don't ask me to lie, cheat, or steal. Give me a lawful order and I'm your guy. Mr Hurley has discussed this with fellow department heads, that they have to understand whoever sits in the First Selectman chair, you have to give them some loyalty. They represent the vision on the town. Even if one has disagreement with that direction, there is an obligation at least not obstruct it. Not every First Selectman has been difficult to work with and Mr Hurley thinks most of the department heads have gotten the non-obstructionist message. Years ago Mr Hurley was asked, if you had a funding increase, where would you put it: equipment or personnel. His response was personnel. Because a good person can run a bad piece of equipment, but a bad person cannot run a good piece of equipment. Work with the people, train the people and the rest will take care of itself.

Discussion turned to the importance of training. Mrs Llodra recalled that she always knew that Mr Hurley's staff was well directed and trained. By training up people you are showing interest in them as people not just employees Mr Hurley said. Mr Hurley recalled telling a past First Selectman that the day his department could not function without him is the day he should be fired. Sandy Hook showed the benefit of training and support of staff. Both Mrs Llodra and Mr Hurley feel the key word is trust.
3. What are your biggest opportunities when there is a new First Selectman?
Most important thing is what the new First Selectman is looking for and you are trying to translate that. It's up to the department head to inform and convince the First Selectman that whatever programs you are working on have worth and add value. Have to go through this exercise for two reasons Mr Hurley said. One it's a self evaluation. The other piece is trust. The First Selectman has to trust that there is good decision making going on in the departments. Mr Hurley referenced Mr Simpson's comment about how technology changes over time. Implementation of GIS is a perfect example. It took a number of years and getting the cooperation of four or five different departments. Over time staff saw the value of GIS. Then it was showing the First Selectman and Legislative Council. Now we are going through a similar process with the town data base. Digitizing all the town records for the Assessor, Public Works, Land Use, Health. It takes time to create a tool that has mutual benefit for all departments.

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4. When there is a new First Selectman, does the culture change or remain the same among town employees?

Mr Hurley feels that the culture doesn't change to any great extent. Department heads have trained their staff to respond to needs so the First Selectman knows those needs are being met.

5. Do you feel your goals for your department are impacted (positive or negative) when there is a new First Selectman?

It could be either positive or negative, Mr Hurley stated. It comes down to making your case and where you want to go. Particular in the public sector, you can't be afraid to make your case. Each time there is a change in leadership, each department has to make their case again that what they are doing has value. The people that put the First Selectman in office are going to ask them about value. Departments need to put together the answers for the First Selectman.

6. When there is a new First Selectman, how does this affect your preparing the budget or CIP? Do you tailor your requests and presentations with that person in mind?

For the most part, the Finance Director sets the tone. Mr Hurley pointed out that over 34 years, he only worked with two Finance Directors. The town has had outstanding financial management and the results are self evident. Both finance directors had a simple one word guideline – "Auditor"

7. If there was a Town Administrator or Town Manager, do you think communication and teamwork would improve, remain the same or be less?

It will be up to the person holding the position. Mr Hurley described life in a town starting with a life appointed Town Manager, went to a contracted Town Manager, then a fight everyday with the council that hired the Town Manager, and then to a Mayor. But now they are thinking of going back to Town Manager. To a follow-up question from Mr Brimmer, Mr Hurley talked about the short term contract and a First Selectman facing an election every two years. Mr Hurley thinks First Selectmen are used to the idea, where in a contractor's worry can be greater. Asked what the council and Town Manager weren't fighting about Mr Hurley gave two examples. In one case the Town Manager did not hire a relative of a council member and in another the Town Manager did not put resources on a project council wanted.

8. In your opinion, what do you think would be the strengths and weaknesses of changing the town executive structure?

Newtown has had a terrific run with many many years of stability. Fear is getting somebody in the First Selectman position that shouldn't be there. Not because of Democrat or Republican, it would be someone that is destructive. With First Selectman there is an opportunity to change every two years. For Town Manager or Administrator, it can take longer depending how the contract is structured. In the end it comes down to people. There has been a civility in Newtown that does not exist in Hartford or Washington D. C. A Town Administrator contract should not coincide with the First Selectman's term. Mr Hurley is concerned that a number of department head retirements in a very short period of time. There was discussion about younger generations not staying with the same employer the way older generations have. Mr Hurley brought up the extended search for a new town engineer. And he appears to be one that will stay for a while. He likes the people and he likes the environment. Mr Hurley believes the Newtown environment has kept people here, not for the money. Mr Hurley highlighted the importance of mid level management, particularly in the larger departments. Training and support has been put towards these people. Train down so people can step up and move forward he said.

Mr Simpson asked if there are examples of areas where the First Selectman has not had the time to address and adding a Town Administrator would free the First Selectman to pursue. Mr Hurley started to pointing out had fortunate Newtown has been to have extraordinary dedicated first selectmen. People need time to not do anything. To think about issues and opportunities then plan.

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Mr Brimmer brought up the scenario where a department head accustomed with dealing with the First Selectman, suddenly found that they were working with a Town Administrator instead. Would there be any noses bent out of shape? Mr Hurley felt that it would be an individual short coming. Mr Hurley encourages direct communications between the First Selectman and staff where the situation, knowledge or expertise is such that it is the expedient thing to do.

DISCUSSION WITH NEWTOWN PARKS & RECREATION DIRECTOR AMY MANGOLD

1. How many first selectmen have you worked for?
Has worked under four First Selectman. Started in the 1980s and 1990s, took time to raise her family then returned under Joe Borst.
2. What are your biggest challenges when there is a new First Selectman?
The candidates are known well before a First Selectman is elected. See the platforms they are running on. Once elected, you have to learn their communication style, what makes them tick and aligning to them.
3. What are your biggest opportunities when there is a new First Selectman?
They may have more alignment with your department goals and town interests. More understanding of the benefits of your department
4. When there is a new First Selectman, does the culture change or remain the same among town employees?
It changes. Some positive and some negative. Mrs Mangold agreed that part of the change is the unknown.
5. Do you feel your goals for your department are impacted (positive or negative) when there is a new First Selectman?
If the department head is good at articulating their goals a new First Selectman will not change them. Doesn't always happen.
6. When there is a new First Selectman, how does this affect your preparing the budget or CIP? Do you tailor your requests and presentations with that person in mind?
Yes, it is necessary to tailor budget and CIP requests with the New Selectman in mind. Some may be more interested on budget impact than impact on the work and services. For example, presenting the need for a new piece of equipment may focus on how it fits in with the departments plans or how it impacts the finances. Mrs Crick-Owen brought up comments from previous discussion that towns are not profit and loss businesses. Mrs Mangold agreed, but pointed out the uniqueness of the Eichler's Cove Marina & Beach that has its own budget and does run like a business. Mrs Mangold talked about the importance of recognizing what members of boards, councils and commissions understand about what the town and departments do. A new First Selectman or Administrator must learn each department because each one runs differently.
7. If there was a Town Administrator or Town Manager, do you think communication and teamwork would improve, remain the same or be less?
Don't see how it would remain the same because it would definitely be a change. Answering this question would require a clear layout and understanding of the role. With reference to the Wilton structure, Mr Brimmer asked if some people would be unhappy about having someone inserted between their previous relationship with the boss. Mrs Mangold thinks we already have a lot of layers and mentioned the recent initiative to take away the Board of Finance layer. Mrs Mangold felt that adding a layer would be tricky. If that person didn't have strong knowledge, how would

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department heads have faith that they would take their needs to the next level. It comes down to the person.

Mrs Crick-Owen referencing comments from Mrs Llodra talked about the concept that the First Selectman job has become denser. Does it make sense to help the First Selectman with an additional position? Mrs Mangold agreed that it has definitely gotten more complicated. It's a huge role and huge time commitment. Perhaps more people would be willing to step up to that role if the salary was increased. Newtown is a remarkable town having enjoyed continuity with capable First Selectman. We have had great leadership. Maybe different styles, but all have been good. Changing the role of the First Selectman might be a better route than adding another layer. Mrs Llodra commented that the role changed even in the 8 years she was First Selectman. She felt that what was missing was the opportunity to step away from the day-to-day and exercise some intellectual energy to long range planning. Newtown has had great management, but leadership need the capacity to address that 10 year vision. This is becoming a handicap for all levels of town management. The Work Group needs to address how the CEO can be freed up to be the visionary. Without this Newtown's future will be an accident of fate.

8. Should it change to Town Administrator or Town Manager?

Mrs Crick-Owen asked Mrs Mangold as both a department head and a resident, should the town change? Mrs Mangold feels that as a resident it is important to have a say in town leadership. If they are elected, it might give them a higher standard. The example of Easton's town manager resigning and walking out of a town council meeting was cited by Mrs Mangold. Either a Town Manager appointed by an elected council or Town Administrator appointed by a First Selectman can become political.

Mr Brimmer related his experience as a Selectman when he found out how little money the First Selectman was paid. A first Selectman could do many things that would pay more. Hasn't changed. There are towns people that say why don't we just pay the First Selectman more money. Mrs Mangold knows people who would be qualified for First Selectman who say they just can't afford to leave the work they are doing. Mrs Llodra indicated that even if we raised the salary, people at the level are not going to risk a career change for a two year job. Mr Brimmer brought up that some cities have made First Selectman a four year job. Mrs Crick-Owen pointed out the flip side that if someone is not doing a good job, there is a two year opportunity for change. Mrs Llodra pointed out the shift to professional management to get away from political churn. Mr Simpson asked if there are areas or topics Mrs Mangold would have likes to see the First Selectman get more involved, such as regional or state efforts. Mrs Mangold responded that First Selectman have always been available and responsive.

NEW BUSINESS

Meeting with Reference Town, Newtown Department Heads and others

Mrs. Crick Owen described a tentative schedule:

March 20

- Herb Rosenthal, former Newtown First Selectman and former CCM Board member
- Ben Branyan, Town Administrator, Greenwich, CT

April 3

- Jim Ritchie, former Superintendent in Plainville CT
-

April 17

- Fred Camillo, First Selectman, Greenwich, CT
- Wendy Mackstutis, First Selectman, Simsbury, CT

Bob Tait, Newtown Finance Director, and Max Freidman, CCM will be scheduled. Mrs Llodra will talk to Ken Kellogg, Monroe CT, First Selectman, about meeting with the

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Work Group. Mrs. Crick Owen is also looking to schedule public hearing, in the evening on one of our dates for a regular meeting, May 1 or May 15.

NEXT MEETING

Next meeting will be a Regular Meeting, Monday March 20, 2023, at 3:30 pm.

VOTER COMMENTS – none

Motion by Mr Brimmer, to adjourn the meeting. Mrs Llodra seconded. All in favor and motion passes.

The meeting was adjourned at 3:27 p.m.

Respectfully submitted,
Ned Simpson