

TOWN ADMINISTRATOR WORKGROUP
REGULAR MEETING, May 15, 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: Four voters and one member of the press

The meeting was called to order at 5:00 p.m. by chair Mrs. Crick Owen.

VOTER COMMENTS – None

ACCEPTANCE OF MINUTES

Mr. Brimmer moved to approve the minutes of May 1, 2023. Mr Simpson seconded. Motion passes.

DISCUSSION WITH WILTON

First Selectman Lynne Vanderslice

Recording available at:

<https://drive.google.com/file/d/11Xrr9iYfGJlUo8uKE4p1tV75K-6qGrQ/view?usp=sharing>

[Wilton switched to a First Selectman – Town Administrator model in 2022. The Work Group met with the new Twon Administrator, Matt Knickerbocker, at the March 6, 2023 meeting.]

Mrs. Vanderslice served on the town's Board of Finance for seven years before her election to First Selectman. She was spending 80 hours per week seven days a week. First selectman and all municipal boards are four-year terms. Mrs. Vanderslice has served two terms and is not running for re-election.

Mrs. Vanderslice described Wilton's movement to a Town Administrator model which started in early 2019. The Board of Selectman recognized that the job had become significantly larger and more complex. Social media has intensified the job where there are now expectations of immediate response. Regional involvement, such as WestCOG, had become more important. In 2029 Wilton lead the fight against school regionalization. The pandemic and changes from the November 2019 election put consideration of Town Administrator aside.

Early 2022, post COVID, the town reopened the conversations, research and consideration of Town Administrator. During the pandemic Mrs. Vanderslice published nightly email reports to the residents. (Now these emails are one or two a month) This greatly informed residents on what was going on in town. The town consolidated schools and town under one CFO. Proposed change generated few public comments at meetings or on Facebook. All concerns were addressed. Within about a month the decision was made.

Mrs. Vanderslice got advice from the former Town Administrator of Weston who she had worked with on shared service projects. She also insisted on a pay cut (about 20% of the \$142,000 base) for the First Selectman. Being the first year of the model, a new CFO, and some BoF issues have kept her spending many hours. However, she has significantly more flexibility in her schedule. Particularly more time to work on long term things. She thinks having a Town Administrator makes running for First Selectman more attractive and that it will be a 40 hour/week job in the future.

Looking forward, Mrs. Vanderslice pointed out that things have become more divisive. Everything that is happening at the national level is now happening in Wilton. It has become harder to find people to volunteer for appointed positions. There was a very contentious budget cycle. There has been 17% turnover in single family housing. These new residents do not understand Town workings or culture. The initial school budget proposal was high. Young families were in a panic. Also, there was a lot of misinformation about the budget. Differences were not particularly along party lines. Turnout for the budget referendum was about 20%, up significantly.

Returning to why a Town Administrator, Mrs. Vanderslice indicated that the BOS realized that there is no telling the skills and capabilities of the next First Selectman and that employees don't have the worry over who will be First Selectman and will they lose their job. The Town Administrator's contract term does not align with First Selectman terms. Mr Brimmer asked if any people in town suggested by paying the First Selectman more money there wouldn't be a need for a Town Administrator? Mrs. Vanderslice stated that didn't come up. Consideration was on the number of hours a First Selectman needed to commit to the job. Someone with a family will not necessarily be attracted to changing jobs to become First Selectman then in four years hopping back onto their career path.

Mrs. Llodra asked if there was consideration of professional management in the form of a Town Manager. Mrs. Vanderslice responded that Wilton likes their Town Meeting form of government. They didn't want to move to a Town Council. Decreasing citizen engagement is an indicator of movement to the Town Manager form of government.

Mr Brimmer asked about the transition that changed reporting relationships, were there noses bent out of shape? Mrs. Vanderslice didn't observe that. It helped that Mr Knickerbocker was known in the community. Mrs. Crick Owen asked about the importance of a Town Administrator living in town. Mrs. Vanderslice thinks it is better if they did not live in town. There was a large pool of qualified people from nearby and nationally.

Mr Simpson asked about the underlying infrastructure of the nightly reports.

OLD BUSINESS

Recording available at:

<https://drive.google.com/file/d/1SPseDS3seohr6zSL4m8amBQ06-MEDZES/view?usp=sharing>

Draft document re: why possible executive structure change

Mrs. Crick Owen acknowledged the Mrs. Llodra had submitted some edits/changes. Mr Simpson had included Mrs. Llodra's work into what is becoming a group document. What to say about changes in work-life was discussed. On the topic of new residents, Mr Simpson noted that in last November's election 37% of voters had lived in Newtown 5

years or less. Mrs. Llodra indicated that she had seen similar statistics. For a prior meeting Mr Brimmer had submitted written comments, but they were not discussed. Turning to his comments, the Work Group agreed with his recommendations. On statements regarding population and economic growth, there were questions of actual numbers and relevance to the Work Groups charter. Mr Simpson will incorporate the changes and send an updated draft. Mr Brimmer brought up the absence of a reference to the suggestion of increasing the First Selectman term to four years. This should be identified, but possibly part of a different document. Mrs. Llodra suggested that some items should be forwarded to another body

NEW BUSINESS

1. Next Steps

Mrs. Crick Owen reported on progress in scheduling reference towns to meet with the Work Group. With Mr Brimmer's assistance, we have a complete schedule. The schedule of reference town meetings now runs through June 26..Mrs. Crick Owen expressed the importance of starting to work on our work product. That product will be a one-page summary with multiple pages of support, such as identification of the towns we talked to. Next meeting Tuesday May 30 will be held at 3:30 pm

VOTER COMMENTS

Elizabeth Lincoln, 34 Echo Valley Rd. Started by thanking Mrs. Crick Owen, Mrs. Llodra and the Rosenthal family for their contributions to the town. She expressed concern over losing that when our town is faced with tremendous issues, particularly of growth. Her main principle is that the First Selectman should be elected. And everybody with administrative duties should follow the First Selectman. They should be the First Selectman's personnel choice. She stated she doesn't want anybody to have personnel responsibility and character identification other than the First Selectman. The First Selectman should have choice and responsibility of any administrative person; what they are made of, and what kind of philosophy they have. Referring to what Pat Llodra lived through Mrs. Lincoln stated that it takes a lot of guts and a lot of stamina, as Herb, and Jack had and as Dan is showing today

Mrs. Llodra moved to adjournment. Mr. Brimmer seconded. All in favor, motion passes. The meeting was adjourned at 6:04 p.m.

Respectfully submitted,
Ned Simpson