

Town Government Study Committee 2014

Town Hall, Great Hall

July 9, 2014

Committee: Vice Chair Rose Mary Donahue, Stanley Brooks, Arthur J Goldberg, Ann Marie Gross, Richard Page, Anna Sereiko, Thomas Ulfelder

Absent: Chair Katherine L. Babson, Jr. , Linda Perlmutter

Vice Chair Rose Mary Donahue called meeting to order at 7:30 pm. She announced that the meeting was being televised by Wellesley cable, and requested that Committee members identify themselves the first time they spoke during the meeting. Richard Page was appointed Acting Secretary for the meeting.

Vice Chair Donahue noted that no one was present to address the committee during Citizens' Speak.

Upon the motion of Arthur Goldberg, seconded by Thomas Ulfelder, the minutes of the July 25, 2014 meeting were approved, subject to minor typographical corrections.

At the request of Vice Chair Donahue, Ann Marie Gross, former member of the Advisory Committee, offered input from Advisory on the work of the Town Government Study Committee. Advisory suggests that the Committee:

- review the functions of each Town department to identify areas where the elimination of redundancy might improve efficiency; for example, consolidating purchasing or information technology functions might create greater leverage with vendors.
- consider why the Town imposes on itself for its construction projects the same permitting procedures that it require of private parties.
- explore the positives and negatives around creating a Town Manager position; in particular, Advisory noted the decentralized nature of Town government is in many ways a strength. Advisory further observed that although a Town Manager position might be able to develop stronger controls around the budget process, the Board of Selectmen already has the ability to develop and lead a disciplined budgeting process.
- think about whether the budget process would benefit from the identification and inclusion of appropriate performance metrics and benchmarks for each department.
- consider each Town department should prepare a level service budget first, and then separately identify and add on top of that funds for any enhancements or aspirational goals.
- examine the relationship between the Human Resources Board's role in setting non-union pay scales and the individual departments' responsibility for setting their own budgets be more clearly defined.
- attempt to understand why Town Meeting attendance declines as the Town Meeting progresses, and suggest appropriate ways to address that, including perhaps reducing the number of Members.

- examine the size of the Board of Selectmen, and look at whether more of their functions could be delegated, in particular to the Executive Director of General Government Services.

The Committee discussed possible reasons for the decline in Town Meeting attendance and concluded that current and former Town Meeting members should be consulted to provide feedback on the Town Meeting process itself; the Committee should also explore whether a change in the size of Town Meeting would in fact have any impact. The Committee also discussed the responsibility that the Board of Selectmen has for setting budget guidelines and determining whether an override budget should be presented, and discussed the role of the Advisory Committee and its processes, and in particular how it receives and distributes information.

Vice Chair Donahue asked the Committee to provide input into how to make the best use of the time Executive Director of General Government Services Hans Larsen when meets with the Committee on July 23. Among the questions proposed were:

- what is his role in Town government?
- what does the yearly budget process look like from his perspective and how does he observe it playing out? How effective is the planning process? How effective are the budget guidelines?
- what resources could he recommend that would help the Committee in its work?

It was noted that Mr. Larsen might need to meet with the Committee more than once. There was discussion about whether the Committee should consult soon with an expert from the state of the various forms of town government in Massachusetts or whether that conversation should be deferred until later, when the Committee has more information. The benefit of understanding the options earlier would be that the Committee be able to think about different approaches to government as it did its work; additionally, the Committee would know up front what aspects of the current structure were statutory and therefore unlikely to change.

Vice Chair Donahue invited Ms. Gross and Mr. Goldberg to present interview questions that they and Linda Perlmutter had drafted to solicit information from Town Boards and Departments. The Committee tentatively concluded that Boards should be interviewed separate from Department staff. In order to expedite the entire information-gathering process and provide the Committee with an understanding of the roles and functions of the different Boards, the Committee suggested that written responses be requested to questions that dealt with factual issues or background information. The Committee discussed the value of meeting with full Boards to gain a variety of perspectives. The Committee discussed the proposed questions and the choice of words in some depth, and offered general and specific input to the drafting team:

- questions should be as simple as possible, but sufficiently open-ended so that respondents could elaborate on their answers.
- Boards should be asked to view processes from their own perspectives rather than from a town-wide perspective; however, input is also needed on whether the overall processes in the Town

are too complex and complicate the ability of Boards to meet their responsibilities and whether Boards believe they can maximize their effectiveness.

- substantial emphasis should be placed throughout the questions on eliciting information regarding Board/ Department interactions with the public, and whether Boards/ Departments could evaluate their responses to inquiries from or interactions with the public, or determine whether their performance met expectations.
- Boards and staff should be encouraged to propose ways that processes or deliberations could be simplified or made easier, and whether processes could be improved to enable quicker action when necessary.
- Boards should be asked to discuss and elaborate on functions that overlap with functions of other Boards, and should be asked to discuss how they work and interact with other Boards/ Departments, in particular with the Board of Selectmen and the Advisory Committee .
- Boards should be asked whether more professional expertise is needed for them to discharge their functions, and the Town Moderator should also be asked whether the Town appears to rely too heavily on volunteers.
- Boards should be invited to discuss the relationship between setting their departmental goals on the one hand and setting their budget goals – pursuant to budget guidelines – on the other, and they should be asked to comment on whether the current system of goal setting and budgeting is effective.
- Boards should be asked to comment on the effect that the current timing of Town Meeting and Town elections has on their processes, their ability to discharge their functions, and their organizational structure.

Ms. Gross and Mr. Goldberg will determine how to incorporate the comments and drafting suggestions into the questions and distribute a new version of the questions for discussion at the Committee's next meeting.

The Committee also discussed whether to invite in staff below the Department head level and, if so, whether staff would meet with the full Committee or some subset thereof, and whether meetings should take place during the day, when staff were in Town at work, or during televised Committee meetings.

Vice Chair Donahue then asked the Committee to discuss how different Board or Departments should be clustered for interviews or meetings. The Committee tentatively concluded that these Boards should come in separately:

- Board of Selectmen and former Selectmen
- School Committee
- Library Trustees
- Advisory Committee and former chairs
- Past Town Moderators

These Boards and Departments might be clustered, with each individual Board/ Department invited to appear for about 45 minutes:

- Facilities Maintenance and Information Technology, as both operate across several departments
- Natural Resources Commission, Wetlands Protection Committee and Community Preservation Committee
- Finance and Treasurer/ Collector
- Audit Committee and Board of Assessors
- Historical Commission and Historic District Commission
- Human Resources/ Retirement
- Housing Authority, Fair Housing Committee and Wellesley Housing Development Corporation
- Planning Board, Building Department, Permanent Building Committee and Zoning Board of Appeals
- Board of Public Works and Municipal Light Plant Board
- Fire Department and Police Department
- Recreation Commission, Trails Committee and Playing Fields Task Force

Additionally, there should be larger, group-specific forums to elicit feedback from these groups:

- The public
- Town Meeting Members
- Business groups and businesses

As a preliminary target, the Committee discussed finalizing its questions by July 30 and promptly distributing them to Town Boards and Departments, with a request for any written responses by Labor Day (September 1).

Vice Chair Donahue reminded the Committee that it should begin to think about developing a survey for the public to which anyone could respond. There was discussion about referring to surveys from past government study groups, as well the merits of on-line instruments. The Committee also discussed the feasibility of establishing a web-site so that Town residents would be able to view Committee materials and minutes.

Vice Chair Donahue requested a motion to adjourn; with the motion made and seconded, the Committee adjourned at 10:15.

Next Meeting is July 23, 2014 in the Great Hall in Town Hall.