

**Government Study Committee
Meeting Minutes
Wednesday, October 6, 2010**

In attendance

Committee members: Betsy Gordon, Daniel Collins, Don Shute, Paula White

1. Approval of minutes and of September 29, 2010 and October 4th meetings

The minutes from the September 29th and October 4th were distributed. The committee will review and vote to approve at the next meeting. It was asked that all committee members reread all the past minutes to see if they are appropriate to post online.

Presented by Marie Molla – Notes Marie used to present the citizen's article 35 petition at Town Meeting in May 2010.

2. Government Study Committee Plan of Action

From the beginning the government study committee agreed on several points:

- We have no preconceived notions. We will go where the data takes us.
- We are looking at the structure of town government. This is not about the people working for the town as a volunteer or employee.
- State regulations, budgetary needs, personnel laws have all changed since the town charter was written. What has worked for Norwell in the past may, or may not, be the most effective form of government for the future.
- We are not responding to a crisis. We have the luxury of looking at all options
- We are going to be as transparent and inclusive so to hear all points of view prior to deciding on our recommendations to Town Meeting.

In September we looked at other towns demographically similar to Norwell to study the pros and cons of various forms of town government.

Now we are meeting with as many Norwell boards, volunteers and citizens as possible to determine what makes sense for Norwell.

The kind of questions we are examining include but are not limited to:

- Might a different government structure increase efficiency? Long term planning?
- Is accountability presently clear? If not, why not?
- Are checks and balances sufficient? Burdensome?
- Does the existing structure help or hinder your ability to work effectively?

3. Advisory Board

The committee met with members of the Advisory Board (hereafter referred to as AB) to discuss several subjects surrounding the governance of the town of Norwell. Comments below are opinions or comments made from members of the Advisory Board (AB).

Members present Ellen Allen – Chair, Gary Thomas, Jason Brown, Ralph Gordon, Peter Shea, Tim Greene – Vice Chair, Mary Ellen Coffey, and Ralph Rivkind.

Appointed vs. Elected

The AB gave the opinion that the Town Clerk and Highway Commissioner should be appointed instead of elected as the Town Accountant, Treasurer and Building Inspector are in Norwell. This enables the town to go outside of town residents to find the most qualified person for the position. It also reduces political pressure on these employees as they no longer need to run for election to keep their jobs.

If you have elected boards and a town manager (hereafter referred to as TM), the individual boards feel they should oversee the employees of that department.

The Advisory Board – is currently appointed by the selectmen. They serve at the pleasure of the selectmen. The committee feels they should be appointed by the moderator or elected.

5 vs. 3 member board of selectmen

- The Advisory favors a larger board as a five member board will ensure diversity of background, opinion, life experiences, and professional experiences.
- Because selectmen are volunteers, many with other careers, the town would be better served with a bigger board to spread out the work.
- With only three people on the board, two members can't talk about town business without posting a meeting 48 hours ahead. It is inefficient to do town business when people can't speak to each other.
- With only 3 members, when one travels or has other obligations, there are only two people making town decisions.
- 5 people would operate more like a board of managers. The board should not deal with operational issues. A hired administrator should take on those tasks.

Long Range Planning

The committee asked the AB if they have seen good long-range planning by all the town boards?
The AB replied: There is not much long range planning that comes from the municipal departments or boards but the AB has requested it and would like to see more. The AB has requested 3 and 5 year long-range plans from the Capital Budget Committee so that the AB could better understand, plan for and prioritize budget items. They would like to see a Town Manager be responsible for a long-term financial plan. That would provide a centralized place for all town budgets. The Advisory board could use this information to make their job more effective and efficient rather than spending hours and hours gathering information.

Why hasn't long range planning happened?

This board (AB) is critical of the BOS's lack of long-term planning. What usually is presented each year is a school budget vs. town budget. The school department does long range planning but the municipal boards do little of this. The school department is an example of how it could work well. The superintendent is hired to create long range plans based on school committee policy and is responsible to see that these plans are implemented. It provides accountability thus ensuring that goals set by the school community are achieved.

Whose responsibility is it to come up with the town's long-range plan, vision?

The advisory board would like to see a fiscal long-range plan in the town. There is a master plan but that does not cover the financial aspects of how the town will function. There is insufficient communication between the entities in town. There is a mission statement within each department, but those are not coordinated at the town level so there is a need for a shared vision to help the town move forward.

Does any department have a strong plan and vision?

School committee is 5 person board plus a superintendent. It is similar to how a 5 person BOS plus a town manager could function. They have a vision, they have projections, they have goals. The school department has a plan of what they will need. They set priorities, set policy on how things are run and spent, where they hope to be and what type of service the town can expect from the schools. The Superintendent implements the school committee policies and goals. This is the way the whole town could run if it were to have a different municipal structure. On the municipal side there are no strategies, just tactics.

What is the Advisory board's experience doing business in Norwell?

It can be hard to get information from the Board of Selectmen. It is easy to get information from the school department. The Fire and Police provide information to the BOS but it does not routinely get passed on to the AB by the Selectmen.

Who should take credit for Norwell's AAA bond rating?

AB-The towns' people should take credit for voting well. The bond rating agency looks at many factors to determine bond rating. Not just free cash and stabilization. They look to see if a town has reserves, if it is dependent on one large business or many, it looks at the overall wealth of a town, and its property values. The agency has also changed its parameters recently and over the past 2 years the number of AAA has increased greatly. There is no evidence that municipal structure by itself affects bond ratings.

The municipal bond ratings agency expects certain pieces of information - dept policy, cash policy, stabilization policy, long range plans etc. – that the AB can't provide because of lack of sufficient information.

Development and Planning

- The town seems to have trouble executing a development plan. There are plans but no one has the authority to execute them. There is accountability to creating the plans but no accountability to put them into place. Road opening permits, liquor license approvals, are the main issues discussed at the selectmen's meeting. It makes more sense to let the town administrator handle these issues so that the selectmen can spend their limited meeting time planning and setting policy.
- Some of the town-owned property is underutilized. There has been an old fire station empty for years on Washington Street for example. A plan was put together by the PBMC but the plan was never executed.
- In order for anyone to do business in Norwell, it can take years. It is not an efficient system. Even things the town wants, like planned growth, conservation of wetland etc. can be impossible to accomplish. This leads to "bad growth" and increases the number of 40bs as developers become frustrated with the delays.
- Friendship house was a great example of how it can work when all the departments and boards can work together. If we are going to restructure government find a way to consolidate the process so that we could coordinate resources and policy and process.
- One solution would be to cut down the departmental "silos." The way the town government is presently organized makes for an ineffective process. Delays and lack of

coordination lead to litigation. There are many good people in town government, but they must work with a bad process.

- Lines of authority and accountability should be clarified so that employees are clear on the hierarch of authority. Do they report too the TA/M or to the elected board.
- The ZBA planning board, and conservation commission have a vision in the master plan but there is a need for transparency and communication if it is to be more fully implemented.

How do other town's advisory boards work and which parts would you like to see adopted in Norwell?

- The AB referenced the *Finance Committee Handbook* that is put out by the association of town finance committees. Many of the things that the handbook advises an AB to do, the selectman have discouraged Norwell's AB from undertaking.
- Insurance Advisory Committee – would like to recommend revitalizing this committee so that the town might save some money in the area of insurance for its employees.
- A TM could realign certain job descriptions and change staff and resources based on need instead of territory.
- We have heard that the town could use a HR manager, perhaps jointly with the School Department. The AB would support that decision.

What could we recommend to make your job easier?

- Strong Town Manager – could realign the staff as needed, provide accountability and increase coordination of departments.
- 5 person board of selectmen.
- Members of the AB should be appointed by some body other than the Selectmen or should be elected. Last year when the AB did not agree with all the selectmen's recommendations to town meeting, the selectmen told the AB that they (the AB) had overstepped their boundaries. This is not a true check and balance system if the selectmen appoint the people who should be checking their recommendations.
- We need clarity and purpose as to the role of all boards, and positions. The AB felt this was especially true as it related to their Board.
- If the selectmen don't appoint a position within a given number of months, then the moderator should have the power to do so. Presently positions often remain empty for excessive amounts of time.
- Include an extra column in the town warrant that details what was actually spent in each town department the following year.

Is the AB in favor of term limits –

There was some discussion on this issue, many members of the AB agree that there should be term limits but others don't feel it is necessary. The consensus was that if there is a 5 member board perhaps term limits are less necessary. If term limits are established for one board they should be consistent for all boards. One possibility suggested was that after a certain number of terms, a board member should be required to leave the board for at least a year before rejoining that board.

4. Adjourn

The meeting was adjourned by unanimous vote.

5. **Next Meeting**

The next meeting of the Government Study Committee will take place on Wednesday, October 13, 2010.