

**Government Study Committee
Meeting Minutes
Wednesday, October 20, 2010
7:00 p.m.
Gym and Offices of Planning Board, Norwell Town Hall**

In attendance: Betsy Gordon; Don Shute; Eric Russo; and Daniel Collins

1. Administrative Matters

The Committee decided that they would meet Nov. 22, Dec. 1, 8 and 15 to review the material they had gathered and to make decisions on recommendations for 2011 Town Meeting.

2. Planning Board

The Committee met in the offices of the Planning Board during the latter's regularly scheduled meeting. All 5 elected members of the Planning Board were present. Committee Chair Betsy Gordon made introductory remarks, including background on the Committee's establishment, purpose, activities to date, and possible options the Town may take on any Committee recommendations.

The Planning Board (the Board) asked about the fundamental differences between a Town Administrator and a Town Manager. The Committee answered that it is studying the Town Charter and gave a brief description of the differences between a Town Administrator and a Town Manager.

The Committee asked the Board about the relationship between the Board and the Planner. Board reviews and recommends candidates for Planner but the Board of Selectmen (BOS) makes the final selection (Town Administrator conducts actual negotiations). Board, Town Administrator, and the BOS usually agree on the final selection. Board feels strongly that Planner should be a full-time employee of Norwell and not shared, as once proposed by the BOS. The planning board was not happy that the suggestion to share a planner with another town was not first discussed with them, as they are an independent elected board.

The Committee asked whether the Board would be adversely impacted by a potential loss of state revenue, such as a sales tax rollback. Board said that planning and zoning efforts could be combined but it does not want to share personnel with a different community. One member recalled that Norwell shared its Building Inspector with Abington but was never paid.

The Committee asked whether the Board's members should be elected or appointed. Board members felt strongly that Planning should be an elected board. Board members also noted a lack of long-term planning, citing ongoing projects that consume Board time.

The Committee asked the Board for its opinion on the question of a 3 or 5-member BOS. Some members preferred a 5-member BOS, one member was indifferent, and another thought a 3-member BOS was “stronger” while a 5-member BOS was “weaker.” The comment was made that if the Committee recommended a Town Manager then the need for a 5-member BOS would be greater.

The Committee asked for the Board’s opinion on a Town Administrator or Town Manager. Board expressed concern that the current Town Administrator’s loyalty lies with the BOS. They thought it would be good if he were more accessible to other boards. A Town Manager, if established, should have more autonomy and authority.

The Committee asked about long term planning. The planning Board oversees the master plan but because they are so busy with reviewing plans, they do little long term planning.

3. Conservation Commission

The Committee heard from Conservation Commission (CC) members Sean Sutton, Deborah Hill, and William Grafton. CC is a 7-member commission appointed by the BOS. Committee Chair Betsy Gordon made introductory remarks, including background on the Committee’s establishment, purpose, and activities to date.

CC members asked the Committee about the differences between a Town Administrator and a Town Manager. The Committee briefly outlined the differences it has gathered from its research and interviews.

The Committee asked whether the members of the CC should be appointed or elected. CC felt strongly that the CC positions should be appointed because it is important to have persons with subject matter expertise or training. Also, elections tend to draw popular citizens but not necessarily the most qualified persons. CC should not be “politicized.” Member Bill Grafton witnessed significant turnover when he served on Hingham’s elected CC.

The Committee asked about long-term planning and whether a Town Administrator or Town Manager could assist with administrative matters. CC said that it was too occupied with administrative work and implementing existing law to engage in long-term planning. An “Open Space Plan” exists and is “excellent” but CC could use the assistance of another entity, like a land trust, to assist CC.

The Committee asked about the appointment and role of the Conservation Agent. CC very happy with current Conservation Agent (CA) Abby Hardy. However, the CA is burdened with administrative duties (Town Administrator does assist to some degree). Ideally, CC would have both a CA and a Conservation Administrator. CC recommends CA candidate but BOS makes final selection. BOS usually agrees with CC’s recommendation.

The Committee asked whether CC preferred a 3 or 5-member BOS. CC felt BOS should be 5-member body because it offers a diversity of viewpoints and greater representation.

5 members would improve policymaking and long-range planning. Members cited BOS Library and police communications proposals as examples of need for more BOS members and opportunities for public input.

The Committee asked whether it would be possible to have a combination of elected and appointed members on the CC. CC said having any elected members would politicize the mission and bring political pressures to bear on an already difficult and sometimes unpopular job. CC should be driven by laws, like the Wetlands Protection Act. Appointed members should not have term limits because it is hard to replace lost expertise and institutional knowledge.

The Committee asked for other advice about Town government. CC noted the lack of clear direction for persons wanting to conduct town business, such as direction to offices and services when visitors enter Town Hall. The CC felt that it would be very helpful if there were a checklist that citizens could use to help them navigate the various regulations and boards that involve land use issues. CC also cited the lack of efficiency and accountability in Town structure, giving the example of a telephone in the CC office that has been broken for a few years. Professional human resources officer has the potential to help. Bill Grafton thought a nominating committee could be a good option for appointing positions. CC thought term limits could get rid of a lot of knowledgeable volunteers unnecessarily, but thought perhaps some elected boards and a nominating committee would benefit from term limits. There was also a suggestion that each board could contribute a job goal for the TA/TM.

4. Public Comment

Norwell resident Marie Molla expressed her opinion that appointed boards should have no term limits because such boards depend on member expertise. Ms. Molla also felt that BOS should tailor questions for particular positions when interviewing applicants.

5. Adjourn

The meeting was adjourned by unanimous vote.

6. Next Meeting

The next meeting of the Government Study Committee will take place on Wednesday, October 27, 2010.