

Ad Hoc Government Study Committee (Westborough, MA)
Minutes of October 11, 2006

Present: Kristina Allen, John E. Arnold, Christopher Senie, Thomas Shea, Manohar Vichare, Brigitte Casemyr

Absent: George Barrette

Chairman Shea called the meeting to order @ 7:00 pm.

Mr. Shea welcomed Dennis O'Neil to the committee meeting. Mr. O'Neil has been invited to speak to the committee since he is a life-long resident of Westborough who is very active in Town Meeting activities and town government. He has also served Westborough and other area towns as Town Treasurer and/or Treasurer/Collector.

Mr. Shea gave Mr. O'Neil a brief summary of the committee's purpose and activities and gave Mr. O'Neil an opportunity to make some remarks to the Committee.

Mr. O'Neil began by giving a brief summary of the government-related activities in which he has participated. He has served as an elected Town Treasurer (prior to the position changing to become an appointed position) in Westborough. He has served as Treasurer/Collector in Ashland and is currently the Treasurer/Collector in Framingham. In Westborough, he has also served on the Advisory Recreation Committee, the Recreation Commission, the Lyman School Study Committees (1 and 2), and the School Committee. He has been an Assistant Building Inspector and has been a long-time, regular Town Meeting attendee.

Mr. O'Neil commented that he has seen significant change in the town including the transition that has resulted in the 'professionalization' of many Town departments. This transition has accompanied the realization that many aspects of Town government need to be run by people with proper qualifications and that the positions need to be paid positions where the pay reflects the qualifications and the responsibility.

At this point, the Committee members asked Mr. O'Neil questions related to his observations and experience in areas of interest to Committee members.

Mr. O'Neil comes regularly into contacts with neighboring town halls in the course of his work, particularly in towns and cities west of 128. He has observed many towns with a lot of spirit, and noted that the need for town employees to be respected increases proportionately with the amount of pay, i.e. the less paid, the more appreciation is needed. In addition, he believes it's difficult for residents to be involved in town politics unless they hold a middle management position in a large company, which can offer more flexibility.

Mr. O'Neil shared his observations of the Representative Town Meeting form of government adopted by Framingham. He also has some knowledge of Ashland, a town that has a 5-member quorum, and generally believes that a strong moderator is key to a

successful town meeting. Framingham's moderator is elected every year, which prevents continuity and consistency, and because the moderator has appointing authority, this is detrimental to good town management. The town has difficulties filling all town meeting representative positions, and only about 80% of the representatives attend the town meeting, meaning that ~160 representatives speak for over 68,000 residents. While others are free to attend, there is clearly a lack of interest in many precincts. Also, the Brazilian population of Framingham is mostly absent from these proceedings. One particularity, and an often aired complaint, of this RTM is that the Board of Selectmen, Finance Committee, School Committee, Planning Board, do not vote. (As a side note, Mr. O'Neil recommended that this committee also research the Milford and Shrewsbury RTM.)

The Finance Committee does not lead the discussion. The collective town meeting has voted standing committees made up of town meeting members, so these highway, capital expenditure etc. committees organize the articles. To bring an article to the floor means to present that article to many standing committees, so lots of duplicated efforts, and these committees do not vote their decisions ahead of time. All discussions are carried out during the RTM. A Framingham RTM with 40 articles can take 10 sessions starting in April/May, go on a hiatus for financial sessions and return to conclude town business in June. A strong moderator is needed to control that process.

Mr. O'Neil commented on the general perception that some committees in Westborough pack the town meeting. He believes this is actually very difficult to do except for just a few committees, such as the Country Club Operating Committee who can summon its 300 members, and possibly the School Committee at times. The veteran town meeting goers usually bring forth judicious points during the proceedings, and he holds the view that it's better to have 300-400 people contributing to the town business than just a few.

Mr. Shea asked for Mr. O'Neil thoughts about a possible impact of future growth, should the town add 5,000 new residents, or new businesses. Any impact would be mitigated by the fact that new businesses would probably be larger businesses, and not local, small businesses. It's not clear to Mr. O'Neil that an increase in population should be reflected in an increase of number of elected officials on the Board of Selectmen for instance, as the BoS is only as effective as its mission is. The risk to the town is more closely related to the danger of elected officials becoming overwhelmed by the weight of their responsibilities, by the sheer level of details needing attention, and diversity of issues, which can often cause the elected officials to not take needed actions.

Mr. O'Neil also discussed the pros and cons of a strong manager, in charge of all administration, and a town council, a policy making body. This is for instance Worcester's town management. The question is really whether or not the town council would have more time to immerse itself in town affairs. Also, the town would then lose the collective wisdom of town meeting members.

A key factor in the smooth management of town affairs is the fact that professionals should be in charge of departments, not just residents who commit time on a volunteer basis. It is also critical that all these department heads be re-aligned under a strong

manager, and that includes the Police Chief, the Fire Chief, head of DPW etc. Mr. O'Neil is an advocate of a strong manager, or CEO, to borrow a title from the business world.

Mr. Senie probed further into the Framingham RTM process and asked if Mr. O'Neil could share any specific problems. Not having had quite enough experience with this RTM, Mr. O'Neil nonetheless stated that Framingham being a large city, had the good fortune of having had a previous town manager who was excellent with numbers, and so a lot of positive actions were accomplished during his tenure. It's not obvious that the current RTM is efficient in its decision making process.

Mr. Senie further asked about the quality of its legislative work. Mr. O'Neil answered that he sees that Westborough's town meeting gets more and better information than the Framingham RTM. Our Board of Selectmen gets better packages, and is better prepared to make timely decisions. Also, Westborough does a better job at publishing information about town meetings, there's a better sense of community.

Mr. Shea asked about elected vs. appointed officials, whether elections are more a popularity contest, for instance for the town clerk position. Mr. O'Neil believes in the sanctity of the vote for an elected person, who has to live in town and care about local issues; further, when such a position is sufficiently paid, quality people will run, which town voters recognize. Mr. O'Neil is concerned about the risk of any appointing authority to appoint a bad person, risk unfairness etc.

Ms. Allen brought up the subject of appointed boards such as the Council on Aging and Board of Health, having to appoint a department head, who then reports back to the board. Mr. O'Neil confirmed that he would recommend that all department heads report to a town manager, which would then make the boards the true policy making body of any department.

Mr. Arnold probed further into this topic, when a board/committee (whether elected or appointed) would not have the department head reporting to them, and whether this organizational structure would impact their effectiveness in setting or advising on policy, and advocating for the constituency they represented. Mr. O'Neil believes that this would still work very well, as the board/committee would continue to advocate for its desires in terms of what services are provided and how they are provided.

Mr. O'Neil was asked to comment on term limits in general. He believes that there is some danger that qualified residents might be scared by a 5-year term, which is probably a leftover from years ago, when the town was working on some very long-term projects. If the town is ready to consider term limits, then it needs to be for everybody.

In a related statement, Mr. O'Neil stated that the personnel board had somewhat outlived its usefulness, now that the Assistant Town Coordinator is also tasked with HR responsibilities.

Overall Mr. O'Neil believes that Westborough has 'Cadillac' services, great response time, quality services, and he does not see any glaring lacks in town services.

Mr. O'Neil recommended, should this committee make recommendations for changes, that it presents them in individual articles.

Mr. Shea thanked Mr. O'Neil for sharing freely his observations and opinions.

Ms. Allen confirmed that she had received from Mr. Harrington the forms of population numbers and towns/cities' structure. Mr. Senie offered to prepare a spreadsheet to facilitate manipulation of that data.

Ms. Allen reported that letters to town employees, asking for their views on town government structure, went out in the 10/2 paycheck mailing. Letters to department heads, directors and committees were reviewed by the committee, and amended to shorten the last sentence as follows: "We will be communicating the progress." Mr. Arnold made a motion to accept the letters as amended. Mr. Senie seconded, the motion passed by unanimous vote.

The minutes of the October 4th meeting were submitted for review, no vote was taken.

Mr. Shea confirmed that there would not be any speaker at the next meeting. Mr. Blois is scheduled to attend on November 8th, and Mr. Mogado on November 14th. The committee will thus not meet on November 15th.

Mr. Vichare asked about job descriptions. Mr. Arnold stated that there are several high-level responsibility statements in the town charter, for the town coordinator, for appointed officials, but not for elected officials.

Mr. Shea inquired about the status of the updated organization chart. Mr. Arnold is working on it, and may need the committee to do another review at the next meeting.

Mr. Vichare requested that at its next meeting, the committee review the Town Action Log he has prepared to help keep the project on track, and to update and prioritize the topics.

The meeting was adjourned at 9:00 pm. (Motion: Mr. Arnold, 2nd: Ms. Allen. Unanimous vote)

Submitted,
Brigitte Casemyr, Secretary