

Town of Ridgefield Form of Government Committee
Approved Meeting Minutes
Monday, November 18, 2024 – 7:00
Town Hall Conference Room – 400 Main Street



1. Call to order

The Form of Government Committee meeting convened at 7:00 PM on Monday, November 18, 2024 in the Town Hall Main Conference Room.

Members present: Laurie Christiansen, Michael Rettger, Charles Robbins, Jonathan Seem, Steve Zemo, Todd Zagorec, Robert Hendrick, Rachel Sondheimer

Members absent: Dennis Tracey

Others Participating: Betsy Gara, CT Council of Small Towns (via Zoom)

2. Public Comment

There were no comments from the public.

3. Meeting Minutes

Motion to approve the minutes of the November 4, 2024 meeting by Mr. Zemo, seconded by Ms. Christiansen. All in favor

4. Interview – Betsy Gara, Executive Director, CT Council of Small Towns

Ms. Gara appeared at the invitation of the Committee to provide background information for the Committee's research on alternative forms of government in Connecticut and to respond to members' questions.

Ms. Gara stated that COST is an association of smaller towns in the state. The group has 115 members, representing towns and small cities with populations under 35,000. She reported that the majority of COST members have the Town Meeting form of government, but that Council/Mayor, Council/Manager, and Representative Town Meeting forms are also represented.

Ms. Gara responded to the written questions that had been provided to her in advance by the Committee, as well as to additional members' questions that arose during the discussion. Among the topics covered in the discussion were the following:

- Concerns among COST members about declining levels of participation by the public in town meetings throughout the state.
- Attempts several communities have explored to expand voter engagement through electronic and other means of remote participation. The various experiments have faced challenges with remote technology in general and with properly validating the voter identity of participants. She also noted that most of these experiments were associated with town meetings during the covid crisis period.
- Towns that have moved away from the town meeting form appear to be more focused on the challenges faced by the First Selectman role, and on replacing day-to-day operational leadership with a town manager/administrator, than by specific goals/concerns about town meeting participation.
- There has been a trend, when state-level legislation introduces new municipal authority or obligations, to place the decision-making responsibility in the hands of the board of selectmen rather than with the town meeting. There has also been a similar trend with charter revisions to shift decision-making for less material municipal actions, such as small land transfers, from the town meeting to the board of selectmen.
- In response to a question, Ms. Gara briefly discussed the differences between a town manager and a town administrator. She suggested the Committee contact the CT City and Town Manager Association for more information. Ms. Gara noted the following towns as currently or recently considering changes to their forms of government from town meeting: Simsbury, Cheshire, Wilton, Clinton.

At the conclusion of the discussion, members thanked Ms. Gara for her time and information. Ms. Gara left the meeting at 8:20.

5. Informational Outreach to Community Groups

Members discussed the update to the presentation outlining the Committee's goals and plans that was reviewed at the previous meeting. *Ms. Christiansen will incorporate remaining member comments and circulate a final version for use in outreach sessions.*

Members reported on their progress in contacting the various community groups identified at the previous meeting.

6. 2025 Meeting Schedule

Motion by Mr. Seem to schedule public hearings to receive input from the public on the Committee's work for Thursday, January 23, 2025 at 7pm and for Saturday, January 25, 2025 at 10:30am, with the January 23 meeting to be followed by a regular meeting of the Committee. Seconded by Mr. Rettger. All in favor.

7. Committee Work Plan

a) Towns to be Studied

The members discussed the proposed listing of towns to be contacted as part of the Committee's research. It was noted that Monroe, Chester, Newtown, and Clinton were added for consideration, as all had proposed changes in town meeting form or authority, but the proposals had either been rejected by the voters or not implemented to date. It was thought that it would be helpful to contact these towns and understand the reasons for those outcomes. Members agreed to defer finalization of a target list until more of the planned interviews with municipal associations and others had been conducted.

b) Interview Schedule

Mr. Zagorec provided an update on his efforts to arrange previously suggested interviews. It was agreed that based on the experience from today's interview with Ms. Gara, that only one interview should be scheduled at each of the next 3-4 upcoming Committee meetings. Due to the difficulty in finding an interview date with Mr. Knickerbocker of Wilton, the Committee will consider holding a special meeting to accommodate his schedule.

c) Interview Questions

Mr. Zagorec will circulate a proposed set of interview questions for comment ahead of the next meeting based on who is scheduled to appear.

d) Public Hearing Dates

As these were agreed to under a prior agenda item, there was no additional discussion of this topic.

e) Case Study Assignments

Members discussed alternatives for organizing teams for conducting the case study interviews. It was agreed to defer this planning until the list of target towns was firmed up.

8. Planning Future Agendas

It was suggested that a standing agenda item to discuss committee communications, both received and distributed, be added to future meeting agendas. All members concurred with this suggestion.

9. Adjournment

Motion to adjourn at 9:10 pm by Mr. Zemo, seconded by Mr. Robbins. All in favor.
Next meeting December 2, 2024, 7:00 pm.

Respectfully Submitted by
Michael Rettger