



Town of Ridgefield

Form of Government Committee Unapproved Meeting Minutes

Public Hearing and Committee Meeting, June 16, 2025

The Form of Government Committee public hearing and committee meeting convened at 7:00PM on Monday, June 16, 2025 in the Town Hall Main Conference Room.

Members present: Laurie Christiansen, Michael Rettger, Charles Robbins (via Zoom), Todd Zagorec, Dennis Tracey, Robert Hendrick, Jonathan Seem, Steve Zemo (via Zoom), Rachel Sondheimer

Members absent: None

1. Public Hearing

Mr. Zagorec began the public hearing with a presentation providing background on the purpose and work of the committee, and summarizing the work, findings, and recommendations of the committee as outlined in the committee's draft report.

Members of the public participated in the session by asking questions and providing comments about various aspects of the committee's draft report throughout and following the presentation:

- Angela Liptack
- Andrew Neblett
- Whitney Altopp
- Sherri Lussier
- Geoffrey Morris
- Debra Franceschini
- Peter Shanley
- Lynn Bliss
- Bill Bliss
- Bob Donahue

The questions and comments included the following:

- Support for the committee's recommendation to retain the Town Meeting
- Support for the proposed changes to the conduct and schedule of Town Meetings
- Concern about whether the proposed town administrator role would add capability for the town versus adding redundancy to staff functions and capabilities
- Concerns about the cost of the proposed town administrator position
- Support for the recommendation to hire a town administrator

- Concerns about whether hiring a town administrator at the expected costs would trigger corresponding increases to other senior town staff positions
- Comments on the importance of broad and effective communication to the public if the town administrator position is implemented.
- Questions about whether the committee had heard specific suggestions from its research on how to improve Town Meeting turnout and participation
- Concern about apparent issues with the town administrator position implementation in Wilton
- A question about the feasibility of splitting Town Meetings into two sessions, one during the day and one in the evening, to accommodate people's schedules
- A question about whether the town should consider creating a grant writer position in advance of or in lieu of a town administrator position
- Comments thanking the committee for its work and for the fact the town is working on the issues presented by the committee

Following completion of public comments and discussion,

Motion by Mr. Rettger to adjourn the public hearing portion of the meeting at 8:23PM.
Second by Mr. Seem. All in favor.

The regular business portion of the Form of Government Committee meeting convened at 8:27PM. All members remained in attendance following the break.

3. Minutes

Motion to approve the minutes of the June 14, 2025 public hearing and special meeting by Mr. Hendrick, seconded by Mr. Tracey. All in favor.

4. Work Plan

Motion by Mr. Rettger to modify the meeting agenda to add an item for the interview with a town meeting moderator. Seconded by Mr. Hendrick. All in favor.

Sharon Dornfeld, one of the regular moderators of Town Meetings, joined at the chair's invitation to provide her thoughts on the elements of the draft report pertaining to the Town Meeting. Mr. Zagorec also distributed an email from Ed Tyrell, the other regular moderator, with his thoughts to the report.

Ms. Dornfeld stated that she generally agreed with Mr. Tyrell's comments but differed on others. She also indicated her support for the committee's recommendation on the hiring of a town administrator. Ms. Dornfeld indicated that despite the lack of a strong news source in town, she did not feel that there was a significant problem with getting information about Town Meetings. She was concerned that attendance patterns reflect public apathy and loss of interest by the public in civic engagement in general. She expressed concern about the proposal to explore electronic voting but acknowledged lack of specific familiarity with the details being suggested. She does feel that there are already procedures and protocols in place to address people's need for accommodation when participating in meetings. Ms. Dornfeld was in agreement with the proposal to have a regular set schedule of Town Meeting dates, as well as the suggestion to make sure there was a span of time between public hearings and Town Meeting votes on proposals.

She did feel that presenting and voting one's opinion in an open meeting format was one of the fundamental historical dimensions of the Town Meeting, and that diminishing that could impact the value of the model.

Members next discussed whether anyone saw the need for changes to the draft report based on the public comments received in the hearing. No one had specific changes to suggest.

Members discussed a draft organization chart that was developed to accompany the job description information in the town administrator portion of the report, as had been suggested at the Saturday hearing. After discussion, it was agreed that the chart did not add the clarity to the information and risked being misinterpreted, so it should not be added to the report.

Members discussed a proposed change to the report by Mr. Zemo and Mr. Robbins to add a minority view section. Mr. Zemo and Mr. Robbins summarized their proposed language, stating that they felt that there should be a voice in the report suggesting the adoption of a council/manager form of government for the town, and outlining their reasoning. The other members expressed several concerns with the proposal:

- This proposal was coming very late in the process and was a significantly different direction from the main body of the report, which has seemed to have general consensus in its development. Mr. Zemo and Mr. Robbins noted that when straw votes and motions had been taken earlier in the process on the question of form of government recommendations, that they had been open and consistent in their preference for the council/manager form, and they felt it was important to raise that option in the report;
- That having a minority report with a different recommendation could diminish the main report and potentially cause confusion to the public;
- Some members stated that if this request were approved, other members with questions about other portions of the report might also want to have their own minority sections.

It was agreed that the committee should not take action on the proposal at this meeting, but use the time before the next meeting to consider options. In response to a suggestion, Mr. Robbins and Mr. Zemo indicated that they might be comfortable with a different approach, of having a section in the main report discussing the fact that all communities larger than 30,000 population in Connecticut have migrated away from the Town Meeting, and that it is likely Ridgefield will also need to change in that direction (toward a council/town manager or mayor/council/town administrator model) at some point in the future with further developments in population size and general government complexity. They offered to draft alternative language for consideration by the committee at its next meeting.

5. Adjournment

Motion to adjourn at 10:33 PM by Mr. Seem. Seconded by Ms. Christiansen. All in favor.

Submitted by
Michael Rettger