



Town of Ridgefield

Form of Government Committee Approved Meeting Minutes Monday, February 3, 2025

1. Call to order

The Form of Government Committee meeting convened at 7:00 PM on Monday, February 3, 2025 in the Town Hall Main Conference Room.

Members present: Laurie Christiansen, Michael Rettger, Jonathan Seem, Todd Zagorec, Rachel Sondheimer

Members absent: Charles Robbins, Steve Zemo, Dennis Tracey, Robert Hendrick

Others Participating: Rudy Marconi, First Selectperson; BOS Members Barbara Manners, Maureen Kozlark, Sean Connelly, Chris Murray

2. Public Comments

None

3. Meeting Minutes

Motion to approve the minutes of the January 23, 2025 special meeting, as amended, and the January 25, 2025 special meeting, as amended, by Mr. Rettger, seconded by Ms. Christiansen. All in favor.

4. Interview with the Board of Selectpersons

Mr. Zagorec provided a brief summary of the Committee's work to date and its plans for further research in support of its charter. He explained that the purposes of the meeting were to hear the BOS members' thoughts on their goals for establishing the Committee and on their views and concerns about the current Town Meeting form of government, on the concept of a town administrator position, and on alternatives to the Town Meeting form.

The BOS members offered the following comments and observations:

BOS members expressed concern about the generally low level of citizen participation in both town meetings and other civic activities like the annual budget referendum. It was observed that

turnout is typically low unless a topic is controversial. It was also noted that the experience is not unique to Ridgefield, and seems to be happening across the country. Several members suggested that lower engagement may be related to the lack of a strong newspaper presence in the town – that people used to look to the local paper as a source of news and information about town issues, but that content has lessened substantially in recent years.

BOS members expressed general satisfaction with the Town Meeting form of government in providing each resident with a direct voice in various decisions of the Town, and commented that alternative forms would seem to lessen that direct participation, or create other issues.

BOS members were generally supportive of the concept of a town administrator position, as a means of dealing with the increasing scope and complexity of town government, and as a means of re-positioning the First Selectperson's role to focus on broader policy matters and to more actively represent the town on legislative matters in Hartford. In response to questions, there was general consensus that such a position should be operational, reporting to the First Selectperson and/or Board of Selectpersons, rather than being the chief executive officer of the town, as is the case in some other municipalities. It was also felt that if adopted, such a position should not be formalized in the Town Charter, at least initially, in order to provide transition and flexibility during implementation. BOS members noted that such a position would involve additional cost to the town, and questioned whether the position would "pay for itself" as has been suggested by other interviewees heard by this Committee.

The Committee members and BOS members discussed various points following the BOS members' remarks. Among the points raised in these discussions were:

- The observation that many residents do not understand that while the BOS is the primary policy making entity of the Town, there are other elements of town government that have significant authority and autonomy in their decision making, such as the Board of Education, Planning and Zoning, and the Police Commission.
- The signature threshold for calling a town meeting should be higher.
- The observation that having all of the BOS and the First Selectperson running for election on the same cycle creates some risk of discontinuity in town operations, if all or a number of existing members chose not to run.
- In the past, the Town had tried clustering Town Meeting items together so as to facilitate having scheduled quarterly Town Meeting sessions, but it was found that many items could not be delayed due to timing – for example, if the town was offered a piece of land for open space, but needed to respond in a short timeframe before the land was sold on the open market. Consequently, this practice was discontinued.
- In response to a question about using electronic or remote voting tools for Town Meetings, BOS members wondered about the expected goals (e.g., would this generate higher participation or greater anonymity of voting), as well as concerns about cost of implementation.

This portion of the meeting concluded and the BOS members left the meeting at 8:55PM.

5. Work Plan

Several members reported that they had reached out to contact towns to be interviewed, but no one had heard a response yet.

There were no updates on the level-set research work.

It was noted that because of the President's Day holiday, there were no other scheduled Committee meetings in February. It was suggested the study groups should use the time before the March meeting to complete their town interviews, if possible.

5. Communications

Ms. Christiansen is scheduled to speak at the Women's Club on February 6. Mr. Seem is waiting to hear a time with the Rotary, which was previously postponed.

There have been no additional communications received to be recorded in the Committee's tracker document. Mr. Seem will update the content to reflect the comments from this evening's meeting.

6. Adjournment

Motion to adjourn at 9:08PM by Mr. Rettger, seconded by Ms. Sondheimer . All in favor.

Next meeting March 3, 2025, 7:00PM.

Submitted by
Michael Rettger