



Town of Ridgefield

Form of Government Committee Approved Meeting Minutes Meeting of April 28, 2025

1. Call to Order

The Form of Government Committee meeting convened at 7:00 PM on Monday, April 28, 2025 in the Town Hall Small Conference Room. (The Large Conference Room as noticed by the agenda was unavailable due to a scheduling conflict with a late-running BOS Executive Session.)

Members present: Laurie Christiansen, Michael Rettger, Jonathan Seem, Charles Robbins, Todd Zagorec, Steve Zemo, Dennis Tracey.

Members absent: Rachel Sondheimer, Robert Hendrick

2. Public Comments

None

3. Minutes

Motion to approve the minutes of the April 21, 2025 meeting by Mr. Robbins, seconded by Mr. Zagorec. All in favor. Mr. Tracey and Mr. Zemo abstained as having been absent at the previous meeting.

4. Work Plan

Mr. Zagorec summarized an interview he conducted with Former First Selectman Robert Bessel of the Town of Canton, which has a Town Meeting/BOS form of government, with a Chief Administrative Officer hired by the BOS. Mr. Bessel noted the importance of technical and communications skills, as well as the relationship between the manager and the key town officials, for the position to work effectively. He suggested that consideration of potential costs versus benefits of a manager/administrator position should take a broad view, including the benefits of risk management in the avoidance of mistakes and unnecessary costs.

Mr. Zagorec reported he is also reaching out to the Town Manager of Windsor, as suggested in one of his other town interviews.

Mr. Zagorec and Mr. Seem reported on their presentation to the Ridgefield Rotary Club.

Mr. Zagorec led the members through a non-binding straw poll of views on various form of government questions, as had been discussed at the prior meeting as a method for determining if there was consensus within the committee on key issues, with the following results.

Representative Town Meeting (“RTM”) Form of Government

No members were in support of recommending a change to the RTM form. Interviews with towns having that form suggested that the approach is not materially better than the current Town Meeting form in terms of providing broader and more consistent participation or in providing better/broader representation of the community at large. Potential problems with the RTM model were also heard, including RTM members becoming too local in their perspective, if representation is based on geographic town districts, and RTM members getting too involved in town administration versus their intended decision-making focus.

Shifting Some Decision-making from the Town Meeting (TM) to the Board of Selectpersons (BOS).

This option arose from concerns about the limited participation in many TMs. Members expressed support for the general concept of recommending changes of this nature, except they expressed less support when presented with specific illustrations of what such changes might entail. The general concern was one of the perception and the reality of taking decision-making away from the general public, should residents wish to be involved. After further discussion, consensus focused on shifting four specific town meeting decisions for possible recommendation in this area: off-cycle budget requests for additional appropriations of less than \$250,000 per request; approval of the creation of new permanent town boards, provided this was subject to further endorsement and ratification by the next subsequent Charter Revision Commission; approval to join or drop town membership in regional and other intergovernmental agencies; and authorization to apply for state and federal grants involving the town sharing the cost. It was noted and recognized that any of the possible recommendations would require a Town Charter change.

Changes to the Operation of the Town Meeting

Members discussed concerns that citizens had expressed about the conduct of some town meetings, including lack of anonymity/privacy in voting and perceptions of feeling intimidated by the process. There was general consensus among committee members that anonymous paper balloting should be used more routinely, particularly in larger TMs with contentious issues, that a separation in time between the public hearing and the TM vote should occur for more contentious issues, and that the town should consider trying regularly-scheduled TM voting sessions again. There was also agreement that the town should look into the feasibility of using electronic voting systems to achieve some of these suggestions.

Town Chief Executive

The initial straw vote on the question of the nature of the town’s chief executive was 5 members favoring an elected chief executive officer of the town and two favoring a hired/appointed chief executive position. After questions and further discussion, the members agreed that the discussion of any new position in the structure of Ridgefield town government should focus on the concept of a hired town administrator/chief operating officer, reporting to an elected chief executive, rather than a town manager model.

Possible Town Administrator Job Description

The members reviewed two alternative outlines of possible job descriptions for a town administrator position. One alternative was fairly broadly defined in terms of job duties, leaving much of the determination of details to the control of the First Selectperson and the Board of Selectpersons. The second alternative outlined specific details for the position, including suggested reporting relationships, duties of the position, and experience and qualifications. There was consensus among the members for the “specific” job description. Members discussed various questions about the outline, which proposed having all major department managers reporting to the TA position. There was also some discussion of an alternative model, in which the TA role served as chief operating officer with oversight of the town’s operating and service functions, operating in parallel with a chief financial officer having responsibility for the major finance-related units.

Following this set of discussions, the members agreed there was sufficient consensus to move forward with a draft report of recommendations. Mr. Zagorec, Mr. Tracey, and Mr. Rettger volunteered to prepare different portions of the draft, with the goal of having suggested draft language available to members by Friday, May 9, so members would have an opportunity for review before the next committee meeting on May 12.

The committee’s plan will be to review and discuss the draft report at the May 12 and May 19 meetings, with the goal of voting on a final draft report at the committee’s June 2 meeting. The executive summary will be prepared once this more detailed portion of the report is agreed upon.

5. Communications

No additional public comments have been received for the comment tracker record.

Ms. Christiansen reviewed a proposed press release for distribution in the coming month, to inform the public of the committee’s progress and invite awareness and participation at the public hearings in June.

It was noted that no additional information sessions with local groups are scheduled at this time.

Mr. Zagorec requested that work on the summary of town interviews be completed before the next meeting.

6. Adjournment

Motion to adjourn at 9:15 PM by Mr. Zemo, seconded by Mr. Robbins. All in favor.

Submitted by
Michael Rettger