

NEW MILFORD, CONNECTICUT

Population: 28,276

Form of Government: Town Council/Mayor

Legislative Body: Town Council

Operational Leader: Mayor

Link to Town Charter:

https://www.newmilford.org/filestorage/3088/3122/Charter-Final_Effective_12-6-18.pdf

Interview with Pete Bass, Mayor of New Milford, CT

THURSDAY, APRIL 3, 2025

Government Structure:

- New Milford has a **Mayor-Town Council** form of government since **1978**.
- The **Mayor** acts as the executive, overseeing day-to-day operations.
- The **Town Council** is the **legislative body**, made up of **9 at-large members** (not district-based), elected every two years along with the mayor.
- There is **minimal turnover**, with officials often serving long terms, which Mayor Bass sees as a strength for consistency and experience.

Budget & Financial Processes:

- For major expenditures (e.g., **\$6.5M library renovation** in 2019), the process involves:
 1. Proposal to the **Board of Finance**
 2. Approval by the **Town Meeting**, typically through **voice vote**
 3. Rarely, a **paper ballot vote** is used (only 3 times in 25 years) for contentious issues
 4. Final bonding or funding decision
- **Town meetings** draw low participation—typically **100–150 residents**—unless the topic is high-interest.
- Routine **road projects** and other non-standard expenses are also brought to town meetings when needed.

Board of Education (BoE):

- Operates **independently** of the town council and mayor.
- The **BoE budget** is separate from the town budget and is voted on via **town-wide referendum**.

- Budget review process:
 1. Superintendent submits to BoE
 2. BoE submits to Town Council
 3. Town Council suggests line-item changes
 4. Sent to **Board of Finance**, which can recommend category-level changes
 5. Final review by BoE before going to public vote

Operational Oversight & Departments:

- The **Mayor** does **not report** to the Town Council and operates independently.
- **Town employees**, including the **Police Chief**, report to the Mayor.
- No Police Commission exists.
- **Independent commissions** (e.g., **Planning & Zoning, Sewer Commission, Library**) manage their own operations, but their staff are town employees.

Civic Engagement:

- **Low civic engagement** overall, except for high-interest topics (e.g., library renovation, turf field).
- All **town meetings are recorded** and made available to the public.
- Issues like the **turf field project** have sparked increased interest and brought new community members into local governance discussions, but interest wanes over time.

Mayor Pete Bass:

- Serving as mayor for **25 years**
- Open and approachable; willing to engage in further discussions if needed

Summary of Key Findings

- **Promoting Efficiency**
 - Town Council with periodic Town Meeting/Referendum questions is generally efficient.
 - Entire Town Council subject to 2-year terms appears to work for New Milford, despite very little turnover and many running unopposed.
 - Referendum for Annual BOE budget has pros and cons worthy of further investigation.
 - Mayor as COO appears to be operationally efficient. Mayor is not distracted by other legislative matters.
 - Limited number of Town Meetings for questions that meet very specific scope and scale.
- **Accountability**
 - 2-year terms for Town Council and Mayor allow for Accountability.

- **Citizen Participation**

- Engagement Low with higher levels of interest for specific questions/topics. However, once question has been voted on, participation again wanes.
- Many Town Council positions are not opposed despite 2 year terms.

- **Responsiveness to Local Needs**

- 2 year terms of Town Council and. Ayor allow for citizens to challenge local government if they feel local needs are not being met.
- Special Town Meetings and Referendums for high profile expenditures reflects further responsiveness.
- Presentation of BOE Annual Budget as separate question form Town Budget also reflects responsiveness to local needs.