

Fairfield

Interview

On April 11, 2025, Charles Robbins, Dennis Tracey and Steve Zemo interviewed the following representatives of the Town of Fairfield:

- Bill Gerber, First Selectman
- David Becker, Chief Operating Officer
- Jennifer Carpenter, Deputy Chief of Staff

1. When was this form of government adopted?

Fairfield has a Board of Selectman/Representative Town Meeting form of government. The RTM exercises legislative authority, and the First Selectman is the Chief Executive and Chief Administrative Officer. In 2023, Bill Gerber was elected First Selectman. Gerber hired David Becker as Chief Operating Officer, a non-Charter position.

2. Why was it adopted?

The rationale of the Representative Town Meeting form of government, according to Bill Gerber, First Selectman, is that in a pure Town Meeting form of government, the electors do not educate themselves on issues to be decided, and participation is limited. The Representative Town Meeting encourages RTM members to prepare for voting and participate actively. However, Fairfield still struggles with limited participation. Initially, the RTM was 50 members, but was recently reduced to 40 members. It has been difficult to recruit candidates to run for RTM.

As noted above, Fairfield has a Chief Operating Officer that reports to the First Selectman. The rationale for hiring a Chief Operating Officer (similar to a Town Administrator) was both for professional management of town matters and for continuity. Fairfield government has historically been run by political leaders, resulting in the exercise of the hiring authority to reward political supporters. This has resulted in a municipal government that lacks professionalism and proper internal controls. Bill Gerber hired a Chief Operating Officer to remedy the lack of professional town management.

3. What works well?

The Chief Operating Officer is not a charter position and is an evolving position with responsibilities determined by the First Selectman. The position works well because the First Selectman and Chief Operating Officer have a good relationship and common goals. The responsibilities of the Chief Operating Officer are determined, in large part, by the skills and talents of the persons in each position. For example, because of Becker's skills, he is responsible for Department of Public Works, Construction Management, Human Services and Parks and Rec. This division of responsibility works well, they reported.

4. What could work better?

The Board of Selectman/RTM form of government, as implemented by Fairfield, is a form of government in which authority is dispersed and decisions must often be approved by multiple boards. For example, decisions must often be taken by the Board of Selectmen, the Board of Finance and the RTM. There are also multiple boards and commissions that must approve certain decisions. The result is that decision-making is unwieldy and slow.

In addition, because there has not been professional town management, the town government is significantly affected by political considerations. The First Selectmen in the past have appointed campaign supporters and family members to key town positions, resulting in less professional and less efficient government. When Gerber was first elected, he learned that two sisters had the sole access to certain town financial records, which was a significant internal control issue. A more professional form of government would mitigate such issues, he said.

5. What additional costs are incurred with this form of government?

We did not identify additional costs incurred with the form of government in Fairfield.

6. What savings or efficiencies are realized with this form of government?

The Chief Operating Officer has identified changes that have resulted in efficiencies and lower costs. Among other things, the Chief Operating Officer determined that the Supervisor of Parks and Recreation was an unnecessary position and it was eliminated.

7. Are you considering changes to your form of government?

Fairfield had a Charter Revision Commission in 2022 that recommended certain changes to the charter. The proposal failed in a referendum. In 2024 RCommission has been appointed, and its work is ongoing. The changes proposed by the First Selectman in the current charter revision process include: (1) establishing professional qualifications for all Town officers; (2) not requiring Chief of Police, Fire Chief and Town Attorney to reside in Fairfield; (3) provide for a Town Administrator, with chief operating officer responsibilities that sits as an ex officio member without vote on all Boards and Commissions.

Gerber said that the former first selectman had explored the possibility of changing the form of government in Ridgefield to Mayor/Council, but the proposal caused significant concerns in town, and was never formally proposed by the Charter Revision Commission. Gerber said that in his view a Council/Town Manager form of government would be more likely to be accepted by the public and would provide some additional assurance of professionalism in government, but he has not formally proposed such a change to the public or to the current Charter Revision Commission. He expressed the view that changing the form of government should be based on data-driven factors demonstrating the need for the change, and significant education of the public over a period of time.

8. What advice would you give to towns considering the adoption of this form of government?

Gerber was satisfied with the role of Chief Operating Officer, but recommended that the position either be established in the Charter or given a 5 year term in order to insulate the position from political changes.

9. Who do the Town Clerk, Tax Collector, and Treasurer report to?

The Town Clerk is an elected position. The Tax Collector is appointed by the Board of Selectman and acts under the direction and control of the Fiscal Officer. The Town Treasurer is appointed by the First Selectman and may be removed by the First Selectman without cause.

10. What have you done to increase participation or improve the effectiveness of Town Meetings?

Low citizen participation is an issue in Fairfield, as in other towns. The RTM is theoretically supposed to promote participation, but has not been successful as there are a limited number of citizens willing to run for office.