

New Canaan

Interview with First Selectman Dionna Carlson on March 19, 2025

1. When did New Canaan replace the Town Meeting with a Town Council?

There are no Town Meetings in New Canaan (public hearings, yes, but no Town Meetings where votes are taken). According to Internet research, New Canaan replaced its Town Meeting form of government with a Town Council in 1991. There are 12 members of the Town Council and they are the legislative authority for New Canaan. The executive function is performed by the 3-member Board of Selectmen.

2. Does the Town Council work well?

Ms. Carlson expressed general satisfaction with the Town Council form of government, and feels that it works better for New Canaan than a Town Meeting model or a Representative Town Meeting. Town Meetings are characterized by low participation, and can magnify the influence of single-issue electors who might not be representative of the community at large. Representative Town Meetings can be large and unwieldy. New Canaan's experience with a Town Council has been generally positive (despite political differences over policy from time to time, which is probably inevitable).

The First Selectman is an *ex officio* member of the Town Council, but has only a tie-breaking vote. She feels that is a satisfactory arrangement, and does not think there would be an advantage to making the First Selectman a regular member of the Council with full voting privileges, or giving the First Selectman a veto over Town Council actions. She thinks full-voting privileges or veto power would unnecessarily add controversy and politics to the process.

3. What could work better?

She didn't express any significant concerns with the Town Council form of government. There can be conflicts, such as when budget constraints make actions by the Town Council difficult to implement, but those kinds of policy implementation problems are part and parcel of municipal governance and probably not caused by the Town Council form of government. More than once, Ms. Carlson emphasized that the effectiveness of the institutions depends on the people involved, more than on the form of government. Capable people willing to work together to solve problems will result in good government.

4. What is the Role of the Administrative Officer?

The charter designates the First Selectman as the Chief Executive Officer and Chief Administrative Officer of the town. Although not set forth in the charter, New Canaan also has an Administrative Officer who reports to the First Selectman. The role of the Administrative Officer seems to be more limited than the role of Administrators or Managers in other towns. For example, department heads report to the First Selectman - not to the

Administrative Officer - and the Administrative Officer does not seem to play a major role in the budget process. Nevertheless, the Administrative Officer acts as a liaison with the various boards and commissions and relieves the First Selectman of much of the day-to-day administrative burden of the position.

The town website describes the duties of the Administrative Officer as follows:

The Administrative Officer assists the First Selectman with these duties and provides administrative assistance to the other two Selectmen and all Boards and Commissions as may be required. The Administrative Officer also acts as Secretary to the Board of Selectmen and is responsible for meeting schedules, notices, agendas, minutes, and the publication of meeting actions for the Board of Selectmen and the Board of Finance and Town Council.

Ms. Carlson meets with the Administrative Officer weekly. She likes the flexibility of not having the job description of the position set forth in the charter. It allows the First Selectman and Administrative Officer to create a working relationship that best fits their skills, their personalities, and the needs of the town. The relationship between the individuals is key to the success or failure of the function.

They have had no shortage of candidates for the position. She recommends that the position be filled by a town resident. A resident will better understand the town and would probably be better received by the electors.

5. The electors can petition to cause referenda. Does that mechanism work well?

There are no automatic referenda in New Canaan - not even for the annual budget. The electors do, however, have the right to petition for a referendum to reverse action taken by the Town Council with respect to appropriations, bond issues, and ordinances.

Notice of intent to petition must be signed and filed by 50 electors within 7 days of publication of the action. Then, if a petition is signed by 5% of the electors and filed within 30 days of publication of the action, a referendum must be held. The referendum passes only if the electors voting in favor of the matter constitute 15% of the total electors.

This very rarely happens. Ms. Carlson remembered one referendum around 10 years ago (about sidewalk installation and maintenance). She does not think automatic or frequent referenda are helpful. They can be politicizing and divisive, not to mention expensive. The electors can hold their government accountable through the electoral process, and in an extreme case through the referendum mechanism.

6. Are there additional costs incurred with this form of government?

The members of the Town Council serve without compensation. The Administrative Officer's base salary is \$140,000. Although hard to quantify, there is some savings from the absence of Town Meetings and from holding only infrequent referenda.

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

No changes under consideration. She is not aware of any movement or desire to reinstate Town Meetings or automatic referenda.

8. What advice would you give to towns considering the replacement of Town Meetings with the establishment of a Town Council?

Do it!