

Simsbury

Interview with First Selectwoman Wendy Mackstutis on April 17, 2025 (Laurie Christiansen and Todd Zagorec)

1. Does the Board of Selectmen-Manager structure work well?

The legislative body in Simsbury is the 6-person Board of Selectmen. Functionally, it is a Town Council-Manager form of government where the Board of Selectmen is a Town Council by another name. The First Selectwoman chairs the Board of Selectmen meetings. The Town Manager is described in the charter as “the chief executive and administrative official of the town” and reports not to the First Selectwoman but to the Board of Selectmen as a whole.

Ms. Mackstutis expressed general satisfaction with the way the government currently functions, with a “supportive” Board and a Manager with whom she has a “collaborative” working relationship. She repeatedly emphasized the importance of the working relationship between the Manager and the First Selectperson.

2. What could work better?

Whether the system works well depends largely on the relationship between the First Selectperson and the Town Manager. As the chief elected officer of the town, the First Selectperson is responsible for chairing Board meetings and dealing with policy and strategic matters, while the Manager is responsible for operational and administrative matters. The distinction between those responsibilities is not always obvious, and greater clarity about the roles of the respective positions might be helpful. It can be a challenge to strike the right balance between clearly defining roles to avoid misunderstandings, and providing adequate flexibility to allow the First Selectperson and Town Manager to work together collaboratively.

Although unelected, the Town Manager is the Chief Executive Officer of the town. Some might consider this a disadvantage in terms of accountability. The Manager is accountable to the elected Board of Selectmen, but not directly to the electors of the town. Some electors might prefer to have an elected Chief Executive Officer.

3. Certain actions (such as the annual budget) trigger automatic referenda, and in certain other cases the electors can petition for referenda or a town meeting. Does that mechanism work well?

Ms. Mackstutis could not remember any town meetings, and said that any references to possible town meetings in the charter were probably oversights that should have been deleted.

She said there might have been petitioned referendum questions, but they have been rare. By and large, the legislative function is performed by the Board of Selectmen, with input from

town residents at public hearings, and referenda when required (such as with the annual budget).

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

A charter revision process is underway and the Charter Review Commission is considering, among other things, clarifying the roles of the First Selectperson and the Town Manager in order to better facilitate a smooth working relationship.

5. What advice would you give to towns considering a council-manager form of government?

Hire an experienced Town Manager and think about the transition. Simsbury hired its first Town Manager in 2017, and Ms. Mackstutis noted that the transition to the new form of government might have gone more smoothly if the First Selectman (who was newly elected) and the Manager (who had previously been only an Assistant Town Manager in another town) had had more experience at that time and not both been new to the job. If there is an outgoing First Selectperson, at the time the Manager is hired, enlist their help to advise the Manager and the incoming First Selectperson. Consider having the Town Attorney brief incoming officials on their responsibilities under the charter.

Clarify what Ms. Mackstutis described as “the lanes” (i.e., the responsibilities of the Manager and the First Selectperson) in order to minimize disagreements and misunderstandings between officials who need to work together collaboratively.

Consider whether an Administrator who reports to the First Selectperson might work better for the town than a Manager. That reporting relationship might help eliminate some of the ambiguity and/or disagreement that might otherwise exist about where the respective responsibilities begin and end, and might make for a smoother working relationship. An elected chief executive officer might also be more accountable to the electors.