

Wilton

Interviews

- Lynne Vanderslice (former First Selectwoman) – December 2, 2024
- Toni Boucher (First Selectwoman) – December 16, 2024
- Video interview of Toni Boucher and Matthew Knickerbocker (Town Administrator) recorded on July 22, 2023 and available online at chestercharter.org

1. When was this form of government adopted?

Wilton hired Matthew Knickerbocker as its first Town Administrator, with Mr. Knickerbocker's 3-year term beginning in September of 2022. The creation of the position of Town Administrator did not, however, involve an amendment of the town charter or any other changes to the form of the town government.

The First Selectman remains the town's chief executive officer and chief administrative officer, while legislative authority is shared between the Town Meeting and the Board of Selectmen. The Town Meeting is the legislative body with respect to certain specified matters, and the Board of Selectmen is the legislative body with respect to all other matters.

2. Why was it adopted?

The Administrator was hired to provide professional town management required by the increased demands and expectations on the First Selectman; to permit the First Selectman to devote more time and attention to strategic matters and to engage more fully in state and regional issues; and to provide continuity of government services when elected officials change.

The position of First Selectman has become more complex and requires more and different knowledge, skill, and time commitment than in the past. The position requires expertise in a wide range of areas, including management, personnel issues (unionized and not), finance, legal, grant applications, budget, public works, public safety, state and federal mandates and regulations, and information technology. Candidates for First Selectman are unlikely to possess all these skills, and the Wilton Board of Selectmen decided that the town would benefit from the professional management of an experienced, qualified Town Administrator.

The Board concluded that when an Administrator handles day-to-day operational matters, the First Selectman would be free to spend more time out in the community and would be able to devote more time and attention to longer term strategic matters (e.g., development issues, business issues, community affairs), as well as to engage more actively, and thereby protect Wilton's interests, in state and regional initiatives.

Because of the increasing burden and complexity of the responsibilities of a First Selectman, the learning curve of a newly elected official is steep. Without a professional Town Administrator, the Board felt there would be a risk that the quality of municipal services may

suffer while a newly elected First Selectman gets up to speed. A professional Town Administrator could ensure that day-to-day operations continue uninterrupted despite changes in elected town leadership.

3. What works well?

Ms. Boucher, Ms. Vanderslice, and Mr. Knickerbocker all agree that having a Town Administrator works well and delivers the expected benefits in terms of expertise, facilitation of focus by the First Selectwoman on strategic matters, and continuity of town services.

Ms. Vanderslice and Ms. Boucher both reported good working relationships with Mr. Knickerbocker, attributing it to a clear division of responsibilities, cooperative personalities, and constructive attitudes. Both described the relationship as collaborative, although Ms. Boucher described her relationship with Mr. Knickerbocker as less formal and "hierarchical" than under Ms. Vanderslice.

4. What could work better?

It has become harder to attract candidates for First Selectman, at least in part because the salary of the position was reduced to help offset part of the Administrator's compensation. It was thought that more candidates might be attracted because of the reduced and more manageable responsibilities of the First Selectman, but the experience when Ms. Vanderslice stepped down was that it actually seemed more difficult.

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

The compensation for the Administrator is currently \$196,000 plus benefits.

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

No attempt has been made to quantify savings, but Ms. Vanderslice, Ms. Boucher, and Mr. Knickerbocker all believe the position pays for itself. Mr. Knickerbocker has led an IT system upgrade, instituted a risk management program (including safety initiatives that have reduced workers compensation claims), managed public works processes, and identified and submitted successful grant applications - all of which are thought to have contributed to savings in excess of the cost of the position.

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

Not currently.

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

It works well and pays for itself. Ms. Vanderslice said she wishes they had hired an Administrator sooner.

With regard to qualifications, Ms. Vanderslice said the Administrator needs a background in finance and experience dealing with a unionized workforce. Ms. Boucher stressed the need for relevant experience and a positive, collaborative personality. Mr. Knickerbocker felt that some familiarity with IT systems is essential.

There is some difference of opinion about whether the position should be in the town charter. It is not currently a charter position in Wilton. Instead, Mr. Knickerbocker was signed to a three-year contract by the Board of Selectmen. Mr. Knickerbocker feels that if it were a charter position, that would help keep it independent of political involvement, because the non-partisan nature of the responsibilities could be clearly spelled out in the charter, rather than being subject to negotiation with each contract. He feels that if it is not addressed in the charter there is some risk of the position becoming a more political "chief of staff" position rather than a non-partisan chief operating officer.

Ms. Vanderslice noted the relative lack of candidates when the position was initially filled, and suggested the job might seem somewhat less stable and attractive to candidates since it isn't in the charter.

Ms Boucher, however, likes the flexibility of it being a non-charter position. The town can more easily adjust or even eliminate the position in the future if that makes sense. She believes the position can be protected against becoming political by making the hiring subject to the approval of the entire Board of Selectmen.

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

The Town Clerk, Tax Collector, and Treasurer report to the Town Administrator.

The Wilton town website has this description of the Town Administrator's position:

The Town Administrator is appointed by the Board of Selectmen and serves as a professional manager. Under the direction of the First Selectman, the Town Administrator is responsible for administrative functions relative to the daily operation of departments under the supervision of the First Selectman, including Finance, Human Resources, Information Systems, Land Use, Assessment, Tax, Town Clerk, Human Services, Public Works and Parks and Recreation. Administrative areas of responsibility include budget development, performance measurement and evaluation, grant administration, program review, insurance administration, risk management, and purchasing.

The Town Administrator assists the First Selectman and the Board of Selectmen as an advisor and informational resource. The Town Administrator carries out Board of Selectmen policies and special projects assigned by the First Selectman.

The First Selectman supervises the Town Administrator, and retains direct responsibility for police (budget only), fire, emergency management, and economic development and community affairs.

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

Efforts have focused on communication (email, signage, etc.).