

Interview Summary
Town of Westport
First Selectwoman Jennifer Tooker

These are summary notes from an interview I conducted February 25 with Jennifer Tooker, First Selectwoman of Westport, as part of the Form of Government Committee research.

Background on Westport Governance Structure

- 1) The primary legislative body is the Representative Town Meeting (“RTM”), This is a 36-member elected body, with 4 representatives elected from each of 9 geographically based districts.

The major authorities of the RTM are

- Review and approval of budgets and capital spending/borrowing, upon recommendation from the Board of Finance. There is no town-wide budget referendum.
- Approval and modifications of town ordinances

- 2) The Board of Finance recommends the annual operating budget and annual capital budget, as well as any interim budget changes, for action by the RTM.
- 3) There is a 3-member Board of Selectmen, with a fairly constrained role – they can approve contracts (after budget approval), and serve as the town’s traffic authority and sewer authority.
- 4) The First Selectman’s office is comprised of the First Selectman and Second Selectman, who run together as a team. The First Selectman has significant operating authority. All town departments report to the FS, including for example, the chief of police and the fire chief, as well as head of personnel, finance director, and most other department heads. The FS can delegate authority to the other members of the BOS. The First Selectman’s position encompasses authorities that fall under the BOS in many other towns.
- 5) The town’s staff includes an Operations Director, who reports to the First Selectman. The position is more akin to a chief of staff, rather than a chief operating officer. The position’s role is to manage and oversee multi-functional projects that cross individual department functions and boundaries.
- 6) Town Boards also include the Board of Education and Planning and Zoning commission, that function independently within their respective statutory areas of responsibility, parallel with other towns in Connecticut.

- 7) The RTF as an entity goes back at least as far as the last Charter revision exercise in Westport, which was sometime in the 90's.

Comments on the Representative Town Meeting

- 1) Most elected boards in Westport see active competition for seats in every election. In sharp contrast, a high portion of RTM seats are uncontested each election.
- 2) In general, the RTM is not particularly representative of the demographics of the town. Most of the members are retired business people and empty-nesters. The RTM has low representation of younger families and families with children and of younger singles (who have grown as a segment of the population of Westport in recent years.)
- 3) Largely due to the above dynamics, the RTM also has a high proportion of "single-issue" focused members.
- 4) I mentioned that we had heard from other interviews that a risk with the RTM form is that the RTM members can stray across boundaries and get inappropriately involved in town policy and operations. Ms. Tooker indicated this can be a problem in Westport, with RTM members meddling in town management and policy, trying to involve themselves in "issues not under their purview." Ms. Tooker has had to intervene to prevent RTM members from going directly to department heads on various issues, and to keep RTM members from chewing up inordinate time of town management and staff.

Mike Rettger
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