

Draft Report

Ridgefield Form of Government Committee

June 9, 2025

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Executive Summary

In response to questions raised by both residents and town officials during the last two Charter revision cycles, the Board of Selectpersons created the Form of Government Committee. The Committee began its work in the summer of 2024, operating under the following mission statement:

The committee is charged with conducting a comprehensive study to compare various types of municipal governments. This study should delve into the structures, functions, and efficacy of different municipal government models authorized by State Statutes, including but not limited to council-manager, mayor-council, and town meeting forms of government. The committee's analysis should focus on the strengths and weaknesses of each model in terms of promoting efficiency, accountability, citizen participation, and responsiveness to local needs. Furthermore, the committee is expected to gather evidence and best practices from municipalities that have implemented innovative governance strategies, with the ultimate goal of providing evidence-based recommendations for improving municipal governance in Ridgefield and better serving the community.

Over the past ten months, we collected and studied information from various sources about municipal governance in Connecticut (as well as in New England generally). We met with officials from Ridgefield and from a representative cross-section of other towns, as well as with representatives of regional and intergovernmental organizations. We also solicited input from the public through media communications, open meetings, public hearings, and contact with community organizations¹.

As a result of that work, the Committee offers the following recommendations.

1. Retain the Town Meeting as Ridgefield's Legislative Body

The Committee recommends preserving the Town Meeting as the town's primary legislative body. It is a hallmark of direct democracy and continues to offer Ridgefield electors a direct voice in important town decisions.

Key Findings:

- Despite low attendance at many meetings, public feedback showed strong support for keeping the Town Meeting.
- Town Councils and Representative Town Meetings offer possible efficiencies but at the cost of direct elector participation.

1(a). Improve Town Meeting Accessibility and Facilitate Participation

To address concerns about scheduling, voting methods, and convenience, the Committee recommends the following measures.

¹ You can find a more detailed description of our work in Section III of this report (*Process*).

Scheduling

- Establish a schedule of regular monthly Town Meeting dates so that interested voters can better plan their attendance and involvement.
- Where appropriate, such as in connection with more significant matters, ensure a time interval between public hearings and votes to allow for thoughtful consideration.

Anonymous and Electronic Voting

- Eliminate voice votes in favor of hand votes or other methods to improve elector accessibility.
- Use paper ballots or electronic voting devices to ensure voter privacy whenever practical. Paper ballots might not be practical in meetings with high attendance or where multiple votes are taken, and if electronic voting devices are not used it might be necessary to call for hand votes - but whenever practical, anonymous voting methods should be used.
- Create a task force to evaluate secure and practical electronic voting systems.

1(b). Transfer Certain Limited Decision-Making Authority to the Board of Selectpersons

To streamline decision-making for routine or low-impact matters, the Committee recommends shifting limited authority from the Town Meeting to the Board of Selectpersons, with involvement of the Board of Finance when appropriate.

Matters Recommended for Board of Selectpersons Authority:

- Off-cycle budget requests under \$250,000.
- Joining or leaving intergovernmental organizations.
- Real estate acquisitions under \$250,000 or leases of land or space for town use of less than \$100,000 per year and 20 years in term.

2. Establish a Professional Town Administrator Role

The increasing scope and complexity of town governance requires professional expertise and continuity in town operations. While some towns have chosen to address this issue by hiring professional Town Managers to replace their elected Chief Executive Officers, the Committee believes it is important for Ridgefield to continue to have an elected Chief Executive Officer. However, in order to deal with the growing demands and complexity of municipal operations, the Committee recommends the creation of a Town Administrator position to serve as the town's Chief Operating Officer.

Key Features:

- Hired by the Board of Selectpersons and reports to the First Selectperson.
- Would manage day-to-day town operations and staff.

- Allows First Selectperson to focus on broader strategy and representation of Ridgefield's interests at the regional and state levels, while continuing to serve as the town's Chief Executive.
- To ensure smooth implementation and continuity, the proposed position should be hired before the next election for First Selectperson and the Board of Selectpersons.
- Formalizing the position in the Charter seems advisable eventually but not initially, in order to work out the scope and impact of the role.

Next Steps:

If the Board of Selectpersons agrees with our recommendations, some of these measures could be implemented right away - such as the scheduling and voting procedures and the creation of a task force to evaluate electronic voting options. The recommended transfer of limited authority from the Town Meeting to the Board of Selectpersons would require Charter amendments, and we encourage the Board to share these recommendations with the next Charter Revision Commission for its consideration.

The creation of the Town Administrator position would not require a Charter amendment, but would need approval at a Town Meeting (as explained in Section II - *Town Administrator Position*). Once the Board and the First Selectperson have had sufficient experience with the position to feel comfortable refining the scope, however, we feel it would be desirable to formalize it in the Charter.

We believe these recommendations will preserve and strengthen Ridgefield's democratic traditions while helping our town government remain accessible, effective, and prepared for whatever challenges the future may bring.

Background Information:

The Committee's work was based on extensive research and analysis, as well as interviews with towns having a range of alternative operating models, as described more fully in Section III (*Process*) on pages 25 and 26. Details of this supporting information can be found in the Appendix and Bibliography to this report (pages 27 and 28), or via links from the Committee's information page on the [Town Website](http://ridgefieldct.gov) (ridgefieldct.gov).

Section I: Legislative Authority

Recommendations:

1. **Keep the Town Meeting.** The Town Meeting is an important democratic institution through which registered electors participate directly in the governance of our town. Therefore, the Committee recommends retaining the Town Meeting as Ridgefield's primary legislative body.
2. **Town Meeting Scheduling.** We recommend establishing a schedule of monthly Town Meetings on a fixed date (for example, the third Thursday of each month), at which time all matters that have arisen since the last Town Meeting would be voted on at the same time. This regular monthly meeting could also be used for information and discussion sessions about town topics, regardless of whether there are matters to be voted on at the meeting. A regular schedule would make it easier for residents to plan ahead and participate. Also, particularly for more contentious issues, and where not already required, we recommend a separation in time between public hearings and Town Meeting votes, giving electors an opportunity to consider issues in greater depth before casting votes.
3. **Anonymous/Electronic Voting.** Voice votes, or voting by standing or raised hands, might exclude electors with particular disabilities and make some electors feel inhibited, anxious, or intimidated, which could discourage participation. Electors may be more likely to participate and vote their true intentions if they are able to do so privately and anonymously. The Committee therefore recommends using anonymous voting methods at Town Meetings whenever practical, such as paper ballots cast privately or electronic voting. Voice votes should be eliminated altogether. We recognize, however, that casting private paper ballots is not always practical in Town Meetings with high attendance or multiple votes, and unless and until electronic voting is implemented a show of hands might be necessary in those situations. We therefore encourage the Board of Selectpersons to create a task force to research and make recommendations regarding electronic voting systems, which would eliminate such practical barriers to private, anonymous voting.
4. **Board of Selectpersons' Decision Authority.** Turnout at Town Meetings is often quite low, and in the interest of efficiency the Committee recommends shifting authority to the Board of Selectpersons for certain less material matters, as more particularly described below, while leaving all other legislative authority, as currently set forth in the Town Charter, in the hands of the electors at Town Meetings. These proposed changes would require amendment of the Town Charter, and should therefore be shared with and considered by the next Charter Revision Commission.

We believe these recommendations would make it more convenient for electors to participate in Town Meetings; would address valid concerns regarding non-private voting methods; and would streamline approval of less material, less potentially contentious matters that would be unlikely to attract large attendance at a Town Meeting - while

preserving the opportunity for electors to participate directly in decision-making with regard to significant town issues.

Background: Municipal Legislative Bodies in Connecticut:

The type of legislative body available to a chartered Connecticut town is established by state statute². The most common forms are:

- Town Meeting
- Town Council
- Representative Town Meeting

1. Town Meeting Form of Government

Of the 169 municipalities in Connecticut, 102 (including Ridgefield) have the Town Meeting as their primary legislative body (see the table referenced as Item 1 in the Appendix).

Town Meetings are an exercise in pure democracy, where the registered electors of the town themselves constitute the legislative body and have the opportunity to express their opinions, hear the opinions of others, and vote directly on civic matters, rather than relying on elected representatives to vote on their behalf.

Concerns about Town Meetings

There are, however, concerns about Town Meetings. They are often characterized by low participation, with a relatively small proportion of the town's electors in attendance. Low participation is not unique to Ridgefield; it is common across Connecticut and throughout New England. Whether because people's lives are busy, a general lack of interest, the decline and disappearance of traditional local news sources, or other reasons, absent a particularly controversial issue, Town Meeting participation is low. That does not necessarily mean residents are dissatisfied with the Town Meeting form of government, though. We heard concerns, but we also heard a great deal of strong support for the Town Meeting form of government from the public, town officials, and town employees.

Low Turnout in Ridgefield Town Meetings

During 2024 and through the end of May 2025 there have been a total of 10 Town Meetings in Ridgefield (not counting the 2024 and 2025 Annual Town and Budget Meetings). According to the minutes, attendance was estimated at five of those meetings³, and the estimated number of participants was as follows:

- 9 (January 22, 2025 – creation of a Fair Rent Commission)

² CGS Section 7-193(a)(1) provides that "The municipality shall have a legislative body, which may be: (A) A town meeting; (B) a representative town meeting; (C) a board of selectmen, council, board of directors, board of aldermen or board of burgesses; or (D) a combination of a town meeting or representative town meeting and one of the bodies listed in subparagraph (C)."

³ Available at: <https://www.ridgefieldct.gov/town-clerk/pages/town-meetings>.

- 67 (December 18, 2024 – approval of funding for the design of a location for the alternative high school and transition program)
- 383 (October 9, 2024 – approval of a lease for location of the alternative high school and transition program, and of a lease for restoration of the Old Branchville Road Schoolhouse)
- 17 (September 25, 2024 – approval of an open space donation on Ketcham Road, and of changes to line of duty death determinations for public safety officers)
- 85 (January 3, 2024 – approval of funding for sidewalks on New Street and Pound Street, electric vehicle chargers, and ADA-compliant playground equipment at Ridgebury and Barlow Mountain Elementary Schools, as well as approval of the use of ARPA funds to purchase two rescue boats by the fire department)

Note that the most highly-attended meetings involved the alternative high school and sidewalk grants - topics that drew significant public interest. In most years, there are typically only one or two such high-interest meetings, with the remainder attracting comparatively little public interest and correspondingly low turnout.

According to the Town Registrars' report for the May 2025 budget referendum, there were 17,507 registered electors in Ridgefield. The highest attendance at the five meetings listed above (383) is only 2.2% of the total number of active registered electors in Ridgefield. The average of the other four meetings is only about 0.3%. This is a small sample size⁴, but indicative of the fact that unless a matter is controversial or high-profile for another reason, attendance at Town Meetings is generally low. This situation is not unique to Ridgefield; all of the towns we interviewed with the Town Meeting form experienced similar low turnout at most Town Meetings.

Poorly attended Town Meetings might not be representative of the interests and opinions of town residents as a whole, and create the possibility for a highly-motivated but small group of residents to exercise disproportionate influence at a Town Meeting.

Concerns about Voting Methods

Voting at Town Meetings is generally conducted in a very public way, often by voice vote or by asking electors to indicate their choice by standing or raising a hand. Members of the public have voiced their concern to the Committee that these voting methods might exclude electors with particular disabilities and make some electors feel inhibited, anxious, or intimidated, which could be a barrier to greater participation.

Scheduling Concerns

Also of concern - when there is a public hearing followed immediately by a Town Meeting where the electors vote on the matter - is the absence of time either to research the matter further or to reflect and consider thoughtfully the comments and opinions residents might have heard for the first time at the public hearing.

⁴ An inspection of the minutes of Town Meetings dating back to 2018 shows that attendance was not estimated or recorded prior to 2024, and as noted in the text, at only five Town Meetings during 2024 and 2025.

The Town Meeting is valuable and worth preserving for the benefit of Ridgefield's residents, but we believe certain adjustments are advisable in order to improve the institution, as described later in the *Conclusions* section of this report.

2. Town Council Form of Government

The Town Council, usually consisting of from five to nine elected members, is the designated legislative body of 60 Connecticut municipalities.

As towns grow in population, they tend to move away from the Town Meeting form of government and toward elected representative legislative bodies. As noted above, 102 Connecticut towns still have the Town Meeting as their primary legislative body. However, 95 of those towns have populations less than 20,000; only 7 towns with populations between 20,000 and 30,000 have Town Meeting forms of government; and no Connecticut town with a population greater than 30,000 still uses the Town Meeting as its legislative body (see the table referenced as Item 1 in the Appendix).

There are 56 municipalities in Connecticut with populations greater than 20,000. Of those, 43 have Town Councils (either a mayor/council or council/manager form of government), 6 have Representative Town Meetings, and as indicated above 7 still use the Town Meeting form of government (with a population of around 25,000, Ridgefield is one of those 7).

Officials interviewed by the Committee from towns with Town Councils seem generally satisfied with their form of government, and feel that it offers certain advantages. In particular, it is easier to organize and conduct a Town Council meeting than a Town Meeting, and the elected members of the Town Council might be more likely to represent a cross-section of the community than a sparsely-attended Town Meeting. Town Council members can also take the time to gather and evaluate information about the issues, and can defer action until they feel ready to make a considered decision - unlike electors at a Town Meeting, who might be hearing about the issue for the first time at the meeting where they are also expected to vote on a final decision.

In short, officials from towns with Town Councils generally expressed the belief that a Town Council is a more efficient way to make decisions, while still being accountable to the electors by way of public hearings, mandatory referenda for particular material matters (such as for example the annual budget and other significant financial matters), opportunities for the electors to petition for Town Meetings and/or referenda, and the electoral process.

Moving from a Town Meeting form of government to a Town Council, however, would take the decision-making process out of the hands of the individual electors, depriving them of the opportunity to participate directly in the legislative process, and as a result might leave residents less motivated to become informed and involved in town affairs. We do not believe that the perceived advantages of a Town Council form of government warrant sacrificing the basic Town Meeting form of government that still seems to serve Ridgefield well at this time.

3. Representative Town Meeting (RTM) Form of Government

Seven Connecticut municipalities have RTMs (see the table referenced as Item 1 in the Appendix). Smaller towns don't have them. Waterford, with a population of just under 20,000, is the smallest town with an RTM.

Like a Town Council, an RTM is a legislative body composed of elected representatives. However, RTM's are much larger than Town Councils. The smallest RTM in Connecticut is in Waterford, with 26 members. The largest is in Greenwich, with 230 members. A town is generally divided into geographic districts, each of which elects one or more representatives to serve in the RTM. In addition, there are often "at large" representatives elected by the town's electors as a whole.

RTMs are intended to be an efficient and better-informed alternative to poorly-attended Town Meetings. They are designed to ensure representation of all neighborhoods of the town, to give voice to a wide range of viewpoints, and to reduce the influence of single-issue special interest groups. In practice, however, the RTM form is not without its problems.

RTMs are big. It can be complicated and expensive to organize multiple district-level elections, and many towns have experienced difficulty recruiting candidates to fill all the positions. Conducting meetings can also be hard. The size alone can make an RTM cumbersome to manage. Officials with some RTM towns have noted that the elected representatives sometimes have a very local perspective, prioritizing the interests of their particular neighborhood above those of the town as a whole. In addition, representatives sometimes go beyond their legislative decision-making role and become involved in administrative matters, blurring the separation of powers and complicating the job of the town's chief executive officer and town departments. We do not believe an RTM would work well for Ridgefield.

Conclusions:

The opportunity for direct self-government inherent in the Town Meeting is so important that the Committee recommends keeping it as Ridgefield's primary legislative body. The Town Meeting has its flaws, but we do not believe those problems warrant abandoning the institution in favor of a Town Council or RTM.

Based on our research and interviews with officials from other towns, the Town Council model seems to work well where it has been adopted, but we do not see advantages in terms of efficiency or quality of governance that would justify eliminating the opportunity for Ridgefield's registered electors to participate directly in the democratic decision-making process for the most significant issues facing the town.

Similarly, while an RTM might work reasonably well in at least some of the towns that use that form of government, we see too many disadvantages in terms of the size of the legislative body, and the cumbersome challenges of making it work well to believe that an RTM would adequately serve the needs of Ridgefield.

Suggestions for Improving Ridgefield's Town Meetings

As described above, attendance at Ridgefield's Town Meetings is generally low, especially for less material, less controversial matters, and we have heard what strike us as valid concerns about the voting process at Town Meetings. Because we believe in its continuing value as an instrument of self-government, we recommend the following adjustments to the Town Meeting:

1. Recommendation: Town Meeting Scheduling

The Committee recommends establishing a schedule of monthly Town Meetings on a fixed date (for example, the third Thursday of each month), at which time all matters that have arisen since the last Town Meeting would be voted on at the same time. This regular monthly meeting could also be used for information and discussion sessions about town topics, regardless of whether there are matters to be voted on at the meeting. A regular, predictable schedule at a convenient time would make it easier for residents to plan their attendance and participation.⁵

Also, particularly for more contentious issues, and where not already required, the Committee recommends that the Board of Selectpersons arrange for a separation in time between public hearings and Town Meeting votes - to ensure that electors have the chance to become informed about the issues well in advance of the Town Meeting.

2. Recommendation: Anonymous/Electronic Voting

We heard legitimate concerns from members of the public that current Town Meeting voting processes (i.e., voice votes, a show of hands, or voting by standing) might tend to disenfranchise electors with certain disabilities, and intimidate some electors. A private, anonymous voting process is more likely to generate results that truly reflect the will of the electors, and might encourage some people to attend who might otherwise be reluctant to do so.

We therefore recommend using anonymous voting methods at Town Meetings whenever practical, such as paper ballots cast privately or hand-held electronic voting devices. Voice votes should be eliminated altogether. We recognize, however, that Town Meetings with high attendance or multiple votes would make the process of privately casting paper ballots time-consuming, cumbersome, and in many cases simply impractical. Consequently, unless and until the town implements electronic voting a show of hands might be necessary in those situations.

However, a show of hands does not address privacy concerns and may not be accessible to electors with particular disabilities. We therefore encourage the Board of Selectpersons to create a task force to research and make recommendations regarding electronic voting

⁵ Special Town Meetings in addition to the regularly-scheduled meetings might occasionally still be necessary for particularly time-sensitive matters.

systems, which would offer speed and accuracy while eliminating practical barriers to private, anonymous voting.

The task force would be instructed to:

- Study the security, reliability, and cost of available systems;
- Evaluate potential vendors⁶, service models (i.e., rental versus purchase), and training and continuing service offerings;
- Contact municipalities that use electronic voting systems and learn about their experiences (for example, Uxbridge, Orleans, Hamilton, Manchester-by-the-Sea, Longmeadow, and Wayland - all in Massachusetts where over 70 towns use electronic voting systems);
- Explore options for state or federal grants;
- Arrange system demonstrations; and
- Deliver a report with findings and recommendations by a deadline, perhaps 6 months⁷.

Careful consideration should be given to the composition of the task force. We recommend including a person with experience as Moderator of Town Meetings, IT specialists, a procurement specialist, a member of the Commission for Accessibility, a member of this Form of Government Committee, members of the public, and such other members as the Board of Selectpersons thinks advisable.

3. Recommendation: Transfer of Limited Decision Authority to Board of Selectpersons

A. Off-cycle Budget Requests Under \$250,000

Under various sections of the Town Charter, a Town Meeting is required to consider and authorize expenditures up to \$250,000 outside of the regular budget cycle when requested by a town department or petitioned by 2% of the registered electors. We recommend giving the Board of Selectpersons (subject to concurrence of the Board of Finance) the authority to approve such expenditures without a Town Meeting. However, if the request originates by petition from the electors, and if either the Board of Selectpersons or Board of Finance does not approve the expenditure, we propose that it would then be decided at a Town Meeting.

B. Membership in Regional or Intergovernmental Organizations

Section 3-14 of the Town Charter requires approval by ordinance at a Town Meeting in order to join or discontinue membership in any regional or intergovernmental organization. We recommend shifting this authority to the Board of Selectpersons without a Town Meeting.

⁶ There are multiple vendors, including for example Option Technologies, Meridia Interactive Solutions, and Turning Technologies. For information about applications specifically for town meetings, see <https://www.meridiaars.com/electronic-voting-system-in-new-england-town-meetings/> or <https://info.optiontechnologies.com/option-technologies-interactive-blog/option-technologies-interactive-blog/bid/56990/town-meeting-electronic-voting-a-big-hit-in-massachusetts>

⁷ For an example see the *Electronic Voting Task Force Report*, Town of Longmeadow (MA) (item 13 in the Bibliography to this report).

C. Real Estate Transactions (Acquisitions)

Section 3-9 of the Town Charter requires Town Meeting approval of the purchase or other acquisition of real estate by the town (other than land donated for open space, conservation easements, or road widening). We recommend that the Board of Selectpersons be authorized to acquire real estate without a Town Meeting where the value is less than \$250,000 and to enter into leases of land or buildings for town use where the annual rent is less than \$100,000 and the term of the lease is less than twenty years (including any automatic extensions of the initial term), both subject to the concurrence of the Board of Finance.

Historical Context of Special Town Meetings and Impact of Our Recommendations

For context, the following table shows, for the years 2020 through 2025 (for 2025, through the end of May) the number of Special Town Meetings held ("STMs" - i.e., not including Annual Town and Budget Meetings), and the number of substantive items voted upon, by type (Budget, Real Estate, Ordinances, and Other). Procedural votes, such as election of a moderator, are not included in these numbers.

Year	Number of STMs	Budget Matters	Real Estate Transactions	Ordinances	Other Matters
2020	3	1	1	1	
2021	4		4		
2022	8	2	7	2	4
2023	6	3	4	2	1
2024	7	3	4	1	1
2025	3	1	1	1	
Total:	31	10	21⁸	7	6

Note that the number of items voted on during the year is sometimes greater than the number of STMs, because of instances where multiple items were voted on at the same STM.

During the past six calendar years there have been 31 STMs, with votes on a total of 44 matters⁹. If our recommendations were in effect, the following 6 of the 44 matters voted on would not have required a Town Meeting:

⁸ Five of the 21 real estate matters were donations of open-space land which do not appear to have required STMs under the Charter. It appears that although STMs were not required, the Board of Selectpersons, in its discretion, chose to handle these matters in STMs.

⁹ These numbers, and the numbers in the table, do not include 6 STMs and 14 items voted on during 2021 and 2022 that dealt exclusively with covid-related matters. We omitted those because the table

- \$140,000 acquisition of 14 acres of open-space property on Bear Mountain (July 15, 2020)
- Acceptance of donation of .378 acres at the corner of Ledges and Ridgebury Road for a running trail for the high school cross-country team (May 19, 2021)
- \$124,000 acquisition of 15.4 acres of open-space property next to property donated by Boy Scouts of America (January 19, 2022)
- \$229,420 appropriation for school safety improvements (September 21, 2022)
- \$81,850 for Town Hall Annex conference room recording and broadcasting capability, and Ridgefield Playhouse ADA-compliant restroom renovation (June 7, 2023)
- \$200,000 for acquisition and installation of a radio communication dispatch console system (May 28, 2025)

We believe our recommendations result in a modest transfer of limited authority from the Town Meeting to the Board of Selectpersons that would streamline approval of less material, less potentially contentious matters that would be unlikely to attract large attendance at a Town Meeting - without disturbing the opportunity of the electors to participate directly in decision-making with regard to ordinances generally and other significant issues.

The foregoing recommendations would require changes to the Town Charter, and we propose that they be provided to the next Charter Revision Commission for its consideration.

is intended to show the normal volume and type of matters handled at STMs, and inclusion of special, pandemic-related matters would distort that view.

Section II: Town Administrator Position

Recommendations:

1. **Elected Chief Executive Officer.** Earlier in this report the Committee has recommended for various reasons that the town retain the Town Meeting as its legislative body. As a closely-related corollary to this, the Committee feels it is important for the town to continue to have an elected, rather than an appointed, chief executive.
2. **Town Administrator Position.** With the growing complexity of local municipal government, it is important to have professional management of town services as well as continuity across changes in elected leadership. The Committee recommends that the town establish a Town Administrator position with a specific job description to serve as the town's chief operating officer. The Town Administrator would be hired by the Board of Selectpersons and would serve under the direction of the First Selectperson.
3. **Town Charter Implications.** The Committee's analysis indicates that a Town Administrator position could be implemented without making changes to the Town Charter. While formalizing the position in the Charter would be desirable at some point in the future, the Committee recommends not doing so until the town has had time to experience the impact of the position on town operations and to consider refinements in the scope and focus of the position.
4. **Timing.** To provide time for smooth implementation as well as to promote consistency, the Committee recommends that the hiring of a Town Administrator be accomplished in advance of the next municipal election for First Selectperson and Board of Selectpersons members.

Background:

Challenges of Increased Complexity and Continuity

A common theme the Committee heard in its interviews with other towns was the increased complexity of running a local town government, both over time and with larger populations. From an external perspective, towns need to be aware of and in compliance with changing federal and state statutes with local implications, as well as to be able to influence the shape of proposed legislation that will have local impacts. Internally, they need to have experienced senior personnel to lead and direct the budget process, to provide senior leadership in developing human resource and compensation policies and in conducting labor negotiations, to oversee complex technical areas of operation and contracting such as IT and public works, and to identify and successfully pursue grants and other external sources of funds.

This growing complexity presents many challenges for towns in finding committed and qualified elected leaders to direct the day-to-day operations of a municipality. For many years, Ridgefield has benefited from an experienced and broadly-capable full-time First

Selectperson. The Committee's interviews found that this experience is not always the case, however, as many towns are finding it increasingly difficult to recruit capable individuals for elected leadership positions, or finding challenges of continuity in maintaining town services when there is leadership turnover.

An added source of complexity, specific to Ridgefield, will occur over the next two years. As the result of Charter changes approved by voters in 2023, the town positions of Town Clerk, Town Treasurer, and Town Tax Collector will change from elected positions to roles hired by the Board of Selectpersons and reporting to the First Selectperson. These organization changes will place new demands on the day-to-day responsibilities of the First Selectperson in managing town operations.

Council/Manager Form – Nature of Chief Executive

One response to these challenges has been a movement toward the Town Council/Town Manager form of government. Twenty-seven towns in Connecticut have adopted that form over time.

Under Connecticut state statutes, the Council/Manager model is distinct from the Town Meeting form. In addition to the Town Council acting as the legislative authority for the town, this model assumes the employment of a professional Town Manager, who is appointed by the Town Council and who is officially the chief executive of the town.

This implied change from an elected to an appointed chief executive is another reason for the Committee's recommendation to retain the Town Meeting form of government. The Committee feels very strongly that having an elected position at the top is an important element in maintaining an effective and responsive town government.

Town Administrator

An alternative approach to the challenges, which has been adopted by a number of Town Meeting-form communities in the state in recent years, has been to establish the position of Town Administrator. In these towns, the position is a municipal employee, hired by the Board of Selectpersons and reporting either to the Board of Selectpersons or, more commonly, to the First Selectperson. The position requires a professional manager experienced in municipal operations and processes, who serves generally as the town's chief operating officer in support of the elected leadership of the town.

The Committee interviewed a number of the towns having a version of this position, including Wilton, Darien, Fairfield, Weston, and Canton. There was a lot of similarity in these towns' design and views of the Town Administrator position:

- Typically, the position has a formal job description, with most or all of the administrative departments of the town reporting to the position.
- In most cases, the Town Administrator position reports to and interacts closely with the First Selectperson.
- In most cases, the First Selectperson position continues to operate (either officially or in practice) as a full-time chief executive, rather than part-time. That is, the Town

Administrator position supplements rather than replaces the role of the chief executive.

- An elected chief executive will have various leadership skills as well as areas of personal expertise and experience. Towns found that hiring a Town Administrator provides the town the opportunity to employ and access professional administrative skills and experience that could complement those present in the elected chief executive of the town.
- Towns felt that having the Town Administrator position allowed the First Selectperson position to focus on broader strategic issues that previously might have received less attention, as well as to participate more actively in representing the town in regional and state-level policy discussions.
- Some towns found that having the Town Administrator position helped them be more active and more successful in identifying and pursuing state and regional grant opportunities.
- While the experience is limited since many Town Administrator positions are relatively new, many towns felt that having the Town Administrator position provides the town with continuity over time that may be beneficial as town leaders change from election to election.
- The towns found that experience, appropriate skills, well-defined boundaries for the job (vs the role of the First Selectperson), and the ability for the First Selectperson and Town Administrator to work together were key success factors.

Conclusions:

The Committee recommends that the Board of Selectpersons create a Town Administrator position, to be selected by the Board of Selectpersons and reporting to the First Selectperson.

Our recommendation is based on many of the same reasons cited by other towns that have created such a position. In particular, given the complexity of the issues involved in running town government, the Committee believes it is important to have a professional manager who brings experience and expertise to the role, and who will provide continuity across changes in town leadership. While Ridgefield has for many years enjoyed experienced and effective leadership, there can be no assurance that candidates experienced in municipal management will be elected in the future. The Committee therefore believes it is important to hire a professional manager to serve as the chief operating officer of the town and help ensure the town's continued effective operation and management.

Hiring a Town Administrator will also give the First Selectperson the ability to spend time on important activities that may not be undertaken without the role, including participation in intergovernmental, regional and state activities that will provide important benefits to the town.

Suggestions for Implementing a Town Administrator Position:

Specific Job Description Recommendations

To facilitate consideration of a Town Administrator position, the Committee has developed the following suggested job description for its conception of the role. After evaluating both a

general/non-specific format and a more detailed format, the Committee believes that adoption of a job description detailing the specific elements of the position would better serve the town. This level of detail should aid in recruiting and hiring for the position, as well as assist in avoiding overlap and potential conflict in roles between the position and that of the First Selectperson.

JOB TITLE: Town Administrator

REPORTS TO: First Selectperson

FLSA: Exempt

SUPERVISES: The Town Administrator oversees the managers/directors of the following: Building Department, Controller, Department of Public Service/Town Engineer, Fire Department, Health Department, Human Resources Department, Information Technology Department, Purchasing and Safety Manager, Social Services, Tax Assessor's Office, Tax Collector's Office, Town Clerk, Treasurer, Tree Warden.

BASIC FUNCTION: The Town Administrator serves as the Chief Operating Officer of the town. The position is a town employee hired by the Board of Selectpersons, reporting to the First Selectperson, and subject to the policy direction of the First Selectperson and the Board of Selectpersons.

ESSENTIAL JOB FUNCTIONS:

- Manages all town employees, and oversees the day-to-day operations of the town, excluding the departments that report to boards and agencies other than the First Selectperson.
- Leads administrative functions of the town under the direction of the First Selectperson and executes and carries out ordinances, resolutions, policies and other actions approved by the Board of Selectpersons.
- Ensures that services and projects are being carried out in a safe, effective and efficient manner
- Provides administrative leadership, guidance, direction and accountability for all municipal operations
- Aids in recruiting and screening of personnel and makes recommendations to the First Selectperson
- Assists in preparing the annual town budget by gathering the necessary data and by compiling estimated budgets by the dates set forth in the Charter.
- Aids the First Selectperson in analyzing and reviewing programs, activities, and budgets, including their short-term and long-term financial and cash flow implications
- Satisfies reasonable requests by officers, boards and commissions to provide information
- Works with the Controller to monitor budget and prepare fiscal reports
- Supervises, trains, assigns work, counsels and evaluates employees; assures safe working conditions for employees
- Assists with grant applications and assists with implementation of grants

- Coordinates with the Superintendent of Schools, the Board of Police Commissioners, the Planning and Zoning Commission, and other town agencies as necessary to assure a good working relationship
- Assists the First Selectperson in directing relationships with state, regional and federal agencies that have or may have an effect on the town.
- Oversees and directs development projects involving significant interface with outside state and other governmental entities, such as State Department of Transportation (e.g., Main Street realignment project, Branchville sidewalk project)
- Assists in negotiating union contracts
- Assists in risk management, including working with insurers and Town Counsel
- Performs other duties as the Board of Selectpersons may determine.

PHYSICAL REQUIREMENTS: Normal office environment with typical business equipment; ability to operate a computer; ability to interface and problem-solve.

EXPERIENCE/QUALIFICATIONS:

- Bachelor's degree required. Five years' supervisory/management experience in municipal government or related experience required.
- Knowledge, skills and abilities should include: good communication skills; supervisory skills; labor relations knowledge; IT systems knowledge and experience; human resources experience; ability to find, secure and implement grants; excellent project management skills; budgeting experience; purchasing and risk management skills.

Alternative Organizational Structure

The proposed job description above contemplates an organizational structure in which all of the town units under the Board of Selectpersons would report to the Town Administrator position.

The following is an alternative configuration, in which town operations get divided broadly between operational units, which would report to the Town Administrator, and finance-related functions, which would report to a chief financial officer. Under this option both senior roles would report to the First Selectperson. The Board of Selectpersons might also consider having the Director of Human Resources report to the First Selectperson. This alternative structure may offer certain advantages in the initial implementation and transition to the new position. Either organizational structure would be effective, and the choice between them should be largely determined by the field of candidates available, both internally and in the market.

FIRST SELECTPERSON

Town Administrator

- Town Clerk
- Building/Roads Department/Town Engineer

- Fire Department/Emergency Management Office
- Health Department
- Social Services
- Tree Warden
- Grants / Grant Applications
- Special Projects (e.g., Main Street realignment, Branchville sidewalks)

Chief Financial Officer

- Controller / Accounting functions
- Treasurer
- Tax Collector's Office
- Assessor's Office
- Information Technology
- Purchasing and Safety/Risk Management

Director of Human Resources (reporting either to the Town Administrator or to the First Selectperson, as determined by the Board of Selectpersons)

As discussed, the First Selectperson and Town Administrator positions need to work well together for the structure to be effective, and particularly, need to be designed to avoid unnecessary overlap. Item 2(b) in the Appendix provides a link to the current job description for Ridgefield's First Selectperson. Certain elements of this job description would need to be changed or clarified if a Town Administrator were implemented.

Analysis of Potential Costs and Cost Offsets

As proposed, the Town Administrator position would be a net addition to the town staffing and operating budget.

Some towns that have implemented this position have concurrently modified the job description/expectations of the First Selectperson position to become a part-time role, with a correspondingly lower salary. Our interviews found that this expectation of less time commitment for the First Selectperson's position was generally not realized. These towns also found that the lower salary substantially reduced the pool of qualified candidates who were willing to stand for election for the position, given the actual time commitment required. For these reasons, the Committee does not recommend changing the First Selectperson's position to be part-time with a correspondingly lower salary.

Surveys of other towns suggest that a qualified Town Administrator position under either organizational configuration above would likely require a salary in the range of \$190,000 to \$225,000, plus benefits. This would have a small impact when viewed relative to the overall combined town budget, but is nonetheless a significant cost.

Some of the towns interviewed suggested that the additional cost of the position was at least partially offset by higher success with grant applications and funding, and/or by enabling the town to be more effective overall in addressing the operating needs of residents. For

example, one town noted that following the implementation of a Town Administrator position, the town was finally able to undertake a major information system upgrade which had been needed for many years but was constantly postponed due to lack of resources for proper oversight. Other towns felt the Town Administrator position was an effective and valuable addition to town operations, but that its benefits were mainly realized through avoidance of “soft costs” rather than with specific realized added revenues or hard savings. For example, one town noted that town governance structure is a factor in a town's credit rating, and having a professional Town Administrator can help maintain an advantageous credit rating with consequent savings in terms of borrowing costs.

Analysis of Impact and Implications for Town Charter

In this section we first discuss whether the proposed Town Administrator position must, or should, be added to the Town’s Charter. We conclude that, at least initially, the position should not be added to the Charter. We then discuss the provisions of the current Charter that may be relevant to a decision to approve a non-Charter Town Administrator.

We note that any opinion on the application of the Charter, or other laws, to a decision to hire a Town Administrator is the responsibility of the Board of Selectpersons. We recommend that the Board of Selectpersons obtain an opinion of Town Attorney prior to any decision to create the role of Town Administrator, to assure compliance with the Town Charter. To the extent it is useful to the Board, the Committee provides its analysis below as a starting point for consideration by the Board of Selectpersons and Town Attorney.

Charter Position vs. Non-Charter Position

Under the authority of the Connecticut Constitution, the Connecticut legislature has delegated “home rule” authority to the municipalities, which is exercised by enacting a Town Charter. Under Section 7-3(f) of the Ridgefield Town Charter, the Board of Selectpersons has the authority to “employ such staff with such powers, duties and responsibilities as it may deem desirable to carry out the duties and responsibilities of the Board of Selectpersons, within the confines of its approved budget.” Under this provision, the Board of Selectpersons has the authority to hire a Town Administrator as long as the salary and benefits of the position are authorized in the town’s budget and the position has been approved by a vote in a Town Meeting. The hiring of a Town Administrator, therefore, does not require that the position be set forth separately in the Charter. Indeed, a number of other municipalities, including New Canaan and Wilton, have hired Town Administrators without a charter revision under similar Charter provisions.

Some municipalities, however, have enacted charter provisions that provide for appointment of a Town Administrator, including the job responsibilities of the position. For example, the charters of Darien (Darien Town Charter Sec. 16) and Weston (Weston Town Charter Sec. 5.3) expressly provide for a Town Administrator.

The advantages of including the Town Administrator in the charter include (1) clear and binding provisions governing the role and authority of the Town Administrator; (2) greater assurance that the Town Administrator’s authority will be recognized by other parts of the municipal government; (3) continuity in the scope of authority of the Town Administrator that is not subject to change based on changes in elected officials; and (4) candidates for the

position may view a Charter position as having greater job security (although this could also be achieved by entering into a multi-year employment agreement). Disadvantages include (1) less flexibility to adjust the role and responsibilities of the Town Administrator to conform to the skills and talents of a given Town Administrator; (2) less ability to modify job functions to suit the working relationship between the First Selectperson and the Town Administrator; and (3) for a newly-established Town Administrator position, less flexibility to adjust job responsibilities over time based on experience with the new position.

Upon consideration of these factors, the Committee recommends that the Town Administrator role in Ridgefield not be a charter position initially. This will allow the town flexibility in the definition of roles within Ridgefield's government and the ability to more easily modify the role as appropriate based on experience. We encourage the next Charter Revision Commission to consider whether adding reference to the position to the Charter is desirable based on the circumstances as they may exist at that time.

Charter Implications of a Non-Charter Town Administrator

Should the Board of Selectpersons decide to establish the position of Town Administrator for our town without having the position explicitly delineated in the Town Charter, there are some Charter implications that should be considered.

1. Creation of the Position of Town Administrator Requires Approval by Town Meeting.

- a. As noted above, under Section 7-3(f) of the Charter, the Board of Selectpersons has the authority to "employ such staff with such powers, duties and responsibilities as it may deem desirable to carry out the duties and responsibilities of the Board of Selectpersons, within the confines of its approved budget." This is the primary authority for the Board to establish the position of Town Administrator.
- b. The power of the Board of Selectpersons to appoint "Administrative Offices, Departments and Employees" is further described in Section 9-1 of the Charter. Section 9-1 provides for appointment of the following: "Town Treasurer, Town Clerk, Tax Collector, Assessor, Building Official, Canine Control Officer, Constables, Controller, Director of Emergency Management, Fire Department, Fire Marshals, Health Department, Public Services Department, Social Services Department, Town Attorney and Tree Warden."
- c. In addition, Section 9-1 provides for creation of additional "administrative offices and departments" that are not currently in the Charter. Specifically, "[t]he Board of Selectpersons may recommend to the Town Meeting, pursuant to provisions of Section 3-13 of this Charter, the creation of such additional administrative offices and departments as it from time to time may deem appropriate and necessary to the best interest of the Town."
- d. Section 3-13 of The Charter provides that the "creation of any permanent board or Town agency not otherwise provided for in this Charter shall require approval by vote of the Town Meeting."
- e. Under Section 1.2 of the Charter, "the terms "Town agency," or "Town agencies," as used in this Charter, shall mean collectively all boards, departments, and elected officials enumerated in Section 4-1."

- f. Section 1.2 of the Charter provides that “the terms “department” or “departments” as used in this Charter shall mean each separate operating unit or function of the Town for which the First Selectperson or the Board of Selectpersons is responsible; each operating unit or function reporting to or under the management of an elected official enumerated in Section 4-1; or such additional departments defined as such elsewhere in this Charter.”
- g. Thus, a Town Administrator would be deemed a “permanent board or Town agency” under Section 3-13 of the Charter and would therefore require that the Board of Selectpersons make such a recommendation to the Town Meeting and that such recommendation be approved by a vote of the Town Meeting.

2. The Town Administrator position must conform to the provisions of the Town Charter on the scope of the authority of the First Selectperson.

- a. Section 8-2 of the Charter provides that “The First Selectperson shall be the full-time chief executive and administrative officer of the Town, and shall be required to carry out the duties charged by the General Statutes and specifically described in Section 8-3 of this Charter.”
- b. Section 8-3 of the Charter provides that “The First Selectperson shall, with general policy direction from the Board of Selectpersons” exercise enumerated duties as chief executive and administrative officer of the town. In particular, Section 8-3(c) provides that the First Selectperson shall be “**directly responsible** for all administrative offices and employees, except as provided by law” (emphasis added).
- c. Section 8-6 of the Charter authorizes the First Selectperson to delegate certain duties. Specifically, section 8-6 authorizes the First Selectperson, in order to “assist in the discharge of the duties and responsibilities of the office and the Board of Selectpersons” to “assign and delegate duties to . . . officials responsible to the First Selectperson”.
- d. Under the foregoing provisions, the First Selectperson is the chief executive and administrative officer of the Town. Consequently, the Town Administrator cannot be charged with those responsibilities – they must remain the responsibilities of the First Selectperson. The Town Administrator may be **delegated** to “assist in the discharge” of those duties and responsibilities.
- e. As noted above, section 8-3(c) of the Charter requires that the First Selectperson be “directly responsible” for all administrative offices and employees. We do not read this provision to require that every office and employee of the town report directly to the First Selectperson. Indeed, the Charter has never been interpreted in that manner. Thus, we believe that it would be consistent with the Charter for designated offices and employees to report to the Town Administrator, as long as the First Selectperson retains ultimate supervisory authority.

We encourage the next Charter Revision Commission to consider whether any changes to the Charter are warranted to adapt the Charter to the new Town Administrator position,

whether that be to specifically enumerate the position within the Charter, or if not, what adjustments to make to recognize and align the desired responsibilities of the First Selectperson relative to those of the Town Administrator.

Suggested Timing of Implementation

One expected benefit of a Town Administrator position would be continuity and consistency of town operations with any change in elected leadership. To achieve this goal, the Committee recommends that the establishment of and hiring for the position should be done, to the extent possible, well in advance of the 2027 municipal election, which will include election of the First Selectperson and the members of the Board of Selectpersons. This timing should allow the Town Administrator to become established in the day-to-day operations of the town as well as to have the opportunity to work with the current elected leadership and town residents. This grounding should prove valuable to the effectiveness of the position even if there is no turnover from the election.

Section III: Process

The Committee's research consisted of:

- Collection and review of relevant materials;
- Interviews with the Ridgefield Board of Selectpersons and certain town officials;
- Interviews with officials from other selected towns;
- Interviews with intergovernmental organizations; and
- An outreach program to solicit public input.

Relevant Materials:

The Committee collected and reviewed data, research papers, presentations, and other material regarding municipal governance primarily in Connecticut, but also in New England generally where the town meeting form of government is common. These materials provided background information and helped guide subsequent interviews and analysis. They are listed in the Bibliography of this report.

The Committee identified eleven towns for closer analysis and comparison: Bethel, Cheshire, Darien, Fairfield, New Canaan, New Milford, Rocky Hill, Simsbury, Weston, Westport, and Wilton. We chose these towns because of their reasonably similar size and demographics to Ridgefield and/or because they represent a sample of the variety of forms of government permitted under Connecticut law.

Committee members examined the charters of Ridgefield and the eleven selected towns. A chart indicating the Ridgefield entity responsible for various legislative, executive, and other functions is accessible by the link in Item 2(a) of the Appendix.

Interviews:

The Committee interviewed the Ridgefield Board of Selectpersons during the Committee's regular meeting of February 3, 2025. The Committee Chair also interviewed the town's First Selectperson, Human Resources Director, Finance Director, and Director of Public Works and Facilities, and met with the town department heads at a regular town staff meeting.

Teams of Committee members formed working groups to interview town officials from the selected towns, with the exception of Wilton, whose former First Selectwoman and current First Selectwoman were interviewed by the Committee as a whole at its regular meetings on December 2, 2024 and December 16, 2024, respectively. Many of our conclusions were based at least in part on these interviews. For a summary comparison of the basic form and attributes of government and links to details of the interviews with officials from the eleven selected towns, see Items 3(a) and 3(b) of the Appendix.

The Committee also interviewed:

- the Executive Director of the Connecticut Council of Small Towns (COST) at the Committee's regular meeting of November 18, 2024;

- the Executive Director of the Western Connecticut Council of Governments (WestCOG) (by a working group of the Committee who reported on the interview at the Committee's regular meeting of December 2, 2024); and
- the Deputy Director and COO of the Connecticut Conference of Municipalities (CCM) at the Committee's regular meeting of December 16, 2024.

Public Outreach:

The Committee recognizes the importance of transparency in its operations and the value of public input. Consequently, it encouraged public awareness and feedback through media communications, open meetings, public hearings, fliers when appropriate, and contact with community organizations.

All Committee meetings were open to the public, with meeting times, locations, agendas, video recordings of meetings, and minutes posted on the town's website (ridgefieldct.gov). All meetings were livestreamed (with one exception due to a meeting room conflict), and many were also available via Zoom. For press releases issued by the Committee, see the link in Item 5(a) of the Appendix.

Committee meetings began with an invitation to members of the public in attendance to offer comments. We also solicited written comments, both by email and letter. Copies of those comments received can be found via the link in Item 4(a) of the Appendix.

The Committee held public hearings on January 23, January 25, [June 14, and June 16,] 2025. Public hearings began with a slide presentation outlining the Committee's assignment. For a link to these presentations, see Item 5(c) of the Appendix. Links to the minutes of the public hearings, which include a summary of public comments at these sessions can be found in Item 4(b) of the Appendix.

The Committee also contacted various community groups to make them aware of its work, and met with the Rotary Club of Ridgefield and the leadership groups of the League of Women Voters of Ridgefield and the Ridgefield Chamber of Commerce.

Appendix

1. Table of form of government and population for all Connecticut towns:
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_municipalities_in_Connecticut
2. How Ridgefield Operates Today
 - a. [Major Town Governance Functions](#)
 - b. [First Selectperson Job Description](#)
3. Reports of Town Interviews
 - a. [Overview Spreadsheet](#)
 - b. Interview Summaries
 - i. [Bethel](#)
 - ii. [Cheshire](#)
 - iii. [Darien](#)
 - iv. [Fairfield](#)
 - v. [New Canaan](#)
 - vi. [New Milford](#)
 - vii. [Rocky Hill](#)
 - viii. [Simsbury](#)
 - ix. [Weston](#)
 - x. [Westport](#)
 - xi. [Wilton](#)
4. Public Comments
 - a. [Emails and Letters](#)
 - b. Public Hearing Minutes
 - i. January 23, 2025: [Minutes \(23 Jan 2025\)](#)
 - ii. January 25, 2025: [Minutes \(25 Jan 2025\)](#)
 - iii. [June 14, 2025](#)
 - iv. [June 16, 2025](#)
5. Communications with the Public
 - a. [Press Releases](#)
 - b. Flyers
 - i. [January Public Hearing](#)
 - ii. [June Public Hearing](#)
 - c. Public Hearing Presentations
 - i. [January Hearings](#)
 - ii. [June Hearings](#)

Bibliography

1. *Research Request: Municipalities with Town Managers, Town Administrators, etc.* (compiled by the Municipal Resource and Service Center as of March 3, 2023 and provided by First Selectman Toni Boucher of Wilton)
2. *Forms of Municipal Government in Connecticut* (as of March 4, 2020 and provided by the Connecticut Conference of Municipalities)
3. *Chief Executive Officer List* (compiled by the Connecticut Office of Policy & Management as of September 13, 2024)
4. *Town Managers*, a Research Report from the Connecticut Office of Legislative Research dated December 22, 2020
5. *Home Rule and Local Control in Connecticut*, a report by the Advisory Commission on Intergovernmental Relations dated January 2022.
6. *Fundamentals of Municipal Government*, a slide presentation from the Connecticut Conference of Municipalities (Matthew Knickerbocker, presenter)
7. *Difference Between a Town and City*, a Research Report from the Connecticut Office of Legislative Research dated October 3, 2022
8. Town of Darien Invitation for Candidates to Apply for the Position of Town Administrator (2024)
9. Newtown Town Administrator Work Group Report (September 5, 2023) (The attachments to the report also include slide decks from meetings of the Wilton Board of Selectmen meetings of January 10, 2021 and January 18, 2022, and job descriptions of the Town Administrator positions for Wilton, Greenwich, and Fairfield.)
10. Slide deck from the Wilton Board of Selectmen meeting of January 4, 2021
11. *A Report on Town Meeting: What Can We Do to Make Town Meeting More Effective and Accessible?* (prepared by League of Women Voters - Acton Area (Massachusetts) June 2024
12. Bryan, Frank M. (2004), *Real Democracy: The New England Town Meeting and How It Works* (The University of Chicago Press)
13. *Electronic Voting Task Force Report*, Town of Longview, December 31, 2021