

Town of Ridgefield Form of Government Committee
Approved Meeting Minutes
Monday, December 2, 2024 - 7:00 pm
Town Hall Large Conference Room, 400 Main Street

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1. Call to order

The Form of Government Committee meeting convened at 7:00 PM on Monday, December 2, 2024 in the Town Hall Main Conference Room.

Members present: Laurie Christiansen, Michael Rettger, Charles Robbins, Jonathan Seem, Steve Zemo, Todd Zagorec, Robert Hendrick, Rachel Sondheimer

Members absent: Dennis Tracey

Others Participating: Lynne Vanderslice, former First Selectwoman, Wilton (via Zoom)

2. Public Comment - There were no comments from the public.

3. Meeting Minutes

Motion to approve the minutes of the November 18, 2024 meeting by Mr. Hendrick, seconded by Mr. Zagorec. All in favor

As Ms. Vanderslice had indicated she would be unable to join the meeting at the start, the committee moved to later items on the agenda in the interim.

5. Report on Conversation with Francis Pickering, WestCOG Executive Director

Mr. Zagorec distributed the following summary of the interview with Mr. Pickering the previous week involving Mr. Zagorec, Mr. Hendrick, and Mr. Rettger.

1. There is no magic bullet out there to address the concerns about public participation and perceptions of responsiveness in local government - at least that any town has implemented so far.
2. RTM models can have their own issues - particularly creating a layer of representation that gets overly tied to population subsets/local areas, resulting in at least the potential for a more parochial approach rather than a broader community-focused view. Also, in some cases the RTMs end up competing with the BOS in decision making and policy setting for the community.
3. Council/manager models can also have issues - particularly with regard to accountability, which can become unclear. The manager isn't directly accountable to the electors, but the elected "legislative" body can also feel less accountable for decisions and town actions, as they have the manager to direct community concerns to. Also, the pattern of manager tenure tends to be either very long term/entrenched or relatively short term with frequent turnover.
4. Some ideas for improving the function/role of the town meet would be to take a look at the responsibilities/authorities, with the idea of moving less critical decisions to the BOS, setting a participation threshold for TM actions (with fallback to BOS if not met), and scheduling TMs on a more regular cycle for routine/non-time sensitive items so that people can better plan their attendance.

The members reviewed the summary, and discussed questions and comments.

6. Level-set Research Update

Mr. Hendrick presented the current draft of his work to provide the committee with a baseline of information regarding the forms of government permitted under the Connecticut Constitution and statutes, details and exhibits on the specific government models in place for the towns that the committee has identified for more research, and demographic and budget information for these towns. Members discussed questions and offered comments on the material.

4. Interview – Lynne Vanderslice, former First Selectwoman, Town of Wilton

Ms. Vanderslice joined the meeting at 7:45.

Ms. Vanderslice responded to questions that had been provided in advance, requesting information on the planning and decision-making process that Wilton went through in deciding to establish the position of town administrator several years ago. She provided background on the recent history of the First Selectman position, offered comments on how the town administrator position developed out of concern for the increasing complexity involved in running a municipality like Wilton, as well as the town's desire to use the administrator position to free up the First Selectman to focus more time on policy and strategic issues arising both locally and in Hartford. Ms. Vanderslice stated she felt that this goal had been largely achieved. She also provided information about the division of reporting responsibilities among the town's department heads between the First Selectman and the town administrator, and responded to members' questions.

At the conclusion of the discussion, members thanked Ms. Vanderslice for her time and information. Ms. Vanderslice left the meeting at 8:20.

6. Level-set Research Update (continued)

The meeting discussion returned to the topic of level-set research. Mr. Hendrick presented an analysis framework for displaying the specific nature of governance processes that could be used when comparing governance models across various towns, and outlined the remaining research he felt would be valuable.

7. Communication - Outreach to Community Groups

Members reported on their progress in contacting the various community groups identified at the previous meetings.

8. 2025 Meeting Schedule

Mr. Zagorec reported that the meeting rooms for the planned public hearings in January have been confirmed. *Ms. Christiansen will see if these dates can be announced in an upcoming weekly town newsletter, with more publicity to follow in early January.*

Mr. Zagorec noted that in addition to the holiday meeting date conflict in January discussed previously, there were also two other holiday meeting date conflicts – President's Day and Labor Day. The members agreed to decide as those dates got closer whether to schedule an alternate meeting date for those meetings.

9. Committee Work Plan

Following discussion of the upcoming meeting schedule through February, *it was agreed that Mr. Zagorec will attempt to arrange two information interviews for each of the upcoming meetings, other than January 6.* After discussion with Board of Selectperson Sean Connolly, who was present as an observer, *the members agreed to modify earlier plans and arrange to interview the Selectpersons as a group if feasible.*

Assignments for teams to conduct town information interviews will be discussed and set at the December 16 meeting.

8. Planning Future Agendas

As this topic had been covered under prior agenda items, there was no additional discussion for this agenda item.

9. Adjournment

Motion to adjourn at 9:20pm by Mr. Robbins, seconded by Mr. Zemo. All in favor.

Next meeting December 16, 2024, 7:00 pm.

Respectfully Submitted by Michael Rettger