

Town of Natick - Town Governance Study Committee

Approved meeting minutes

January 18, 2023 7:00 PM

Via Zoom

Members present: Carol Gloff (Chair), Matt Brand (Vice Chair), Linda Wollschlager, Lisa Ward-Tabenkin, Dan Sullivan, Michael Avitzur, Hillary Truslow.

Ex Officio member: Sue Salamoff.

Also present: Carl Valente, Bernie Lynch and John Petrin, all of Community Paradigm, and Dom Mallozzi.

The meeting was called to order by Chair Gloff at 7:10 PM with reference to the regulations applicable to virtual public meetings, followed by a roll call.

Public Speak

None.

Community Paradigm Presentation – Options for Local Government Organizations in Massachusetts

Mr. Lynch spoke on trends in municipal forms of government in Massachusetts. He shared a PowerPoint presentation on the topic, starting with the four forms available, including variations. He noted that Natick's move toward more professionalization of its government in the 1980s was part of a broader statewide trend away from part-time volunteer governments. Currently, most municipalities have a town meeting paired with some level of professional management but on a spectrum in terms of that level, as well as how many positions are elected. A recent trend involves towns moving from town meeting to an elected Council, effectively becoming cities.

Mr. Lynch next shared data on the breakdown of government forms, both within Massachusetts and nationwide. He promised to share a list showing the forms of government for each of the Commonwealth's 351 municipalities. There was a discussion of various individual cities' and towns' unique management and legislative structures.

Mr. Lynch presented information about the 12 communities that have both a town council and some form of town manager (with varying levels of authority), followed by the three with a city council, a city manager (who exercises total executive authority), and a mayor (who actually operates as more of a council president only). He then explained the city-mayor form of government.

Mr. Petrin discussed problems that lead to changes in government, in three broad categories: a need to improve operations, political infighting or lack of interest, and litigation that leads to anarchy. Mr. Lynch then talked through reasons communities tend to seek changes specifically in the chief-executive role, with a focus on the differences between a mayor and manager. He urged members to consider who in Natick is promoting a change.

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There followed a discussion of the problem of lack of participation/competition for town-meeting positions. Mr. Lynch offered to provide further details on governance in specific municipalities comparable to Natick, and Dan proposed that any such study include Danvers, Braintree, and Burlington, for various reasons, including the existence of a large shopping mall in each. We discussed Franklin as a peer as well. Carol suggested we look at a group of about ten. Mr. Petrin cautioned that significant change takes a lot of work, so much forethought should go into determining whether there is a need, articulating those reasons, and planning for implementing any change.

Carol suggested that the committee begin to consider whether there are certain governance options that could be ruled out as potential recommendations for change. Matt recommended starting by asking what would make Natick's government more efficient and then pursuing changes that could achieve this goal. One way to do that would be to look at the impacts seen within those municipalities that have made various changes to their governments. This approach would avoid the pitfall of choosing a solution first and then identifying a problem that it would address.

Sue agreed with Matt and described some of the problems that led her to support the creation of this committee. Carol asked members to re-read the two reports that the Committee has produced, on the interviews that we've conducted and the survey we distributed, which collectively highlight most, if not all, of the problems we will need to address. Mr. Mallozzi expressed a concern about the lack of civic participation in Natick and urged members to try to learn more about the reasons therefor, while also suggesting that town communication to residents could be improved.

There followed a discussion of how best to choose peer communities for comparison and how many to include in our analysis. Mr. Valente offered guidance on how to consider what constitutes efficiency of government and what makes a community comparable to Natick. Linda said that we should start by first identifying the problems that we agree need to be addressed. Mike concurred, saying that this should be used to determine which communities are comparable, rather than merely using statistical measures. Dan said that the interviews we conducted have put a spotlight on these problems, with about 12-15 that we can pull out and then prioritize. Carol said we could do that at the next meeting.

The next meeting was scheduled for January 30th at 7pm, with representatives from Community Paradigm.

Carol asked for volunteers to plan for a future community forum, and Josh (prior to the meeting), Sue, and Lisa volunteered. Linda expressed an interest in broader outreach to the community, including through existing civic organizations in town, such as Natick Is United.

Meeting Minutes

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A vote on the minutes from the January 9, 2023, meeting was put off.

New Business

None.

Old Business

None.

On a motion by Matt, seconded by Linda, the meeting was adjourned on a unanimous roll call vote at 9:11 pm.

Respectfully submitted,
Michael Avitzur