

Town of Natick - Town Governance Study Committee

Approved meeting minutes

May 8, 2023 7:00 PM

Via Zoom

Members present: Carol Gloff (Chair), Matt Brand (Vice-Chair), Josh Ostroff (Clerk), Hillary Truslow, Michael Avitzur, Linda Wollschlager, Dan Sullivan, Sue Salamoff (ex officio). Also present: John Petrin, Carl Valente.

The meeting was called to order by Chair Gloff at 7:05 PM with reference to the regulations applicable to virtual public meetings, followed by a roll call.

Public Speak

None.

January 9, 2023 minutes

Josh explained the reason for this agenda item: Carol had submitted the posting for January 9, 2023, but it was mistakenly posted for January 4, which was not discovered until Josh posted the minutes for the meeting. We have received guidance from Karis North, Town Counsel, to vote to affirm the actions taken at the January 9 meeting, and append those minutes to this meeting's minutes.

Dan moved, and Linda seconded to ratify the vote to approve the November 22, 2022 minutes. On a roll call vote, the motion was unanimously approved.

Dan moved, and Linda seconded to ratify the vote to approve the December 12, 2022 minutes. On a roll call vote, the motion was unanimously approved with Hillary abstaining,

The minutes for January 9 are appended to the minutes for this meeting.

Public Survey

Hilary noted that we had 88 responses. Some were likely participants in the TM survey. We will look at the results for an upcoming meeting.

(We started recording, and Carol recapped the meeting to date.)

Sue joined the meeting at 7:17.

Governing Principles

Carol described edits to the document based on comments at our last meeting; document incorporated for reference. Members reviewed and offered minor editorial suggestions. On a motion by Josh, seconded by Dan, the committee unanimously voted to approve the governing principles document.

Town Meeting

Members discussed how the recent challenges at Town Meeting were timely in that they highlighted some of the problems that led the Select Board to establish our committee.

Josh discussed the positives and negatives of Town Meeting; in essence we trade off accessibility of government against efficiency and good use of time, both volunteers and staff.

Carol read Matt's comments, since Matt could not be here; incorporated below.

When we set out on this "journey" with the Town Governance Study Committee, I was very careful to calibrate towards staying as open-minded as possible on all topics and specifically if I believed Town Meeting as the legislative body was the right thing for Natick. During this process I have heard and read feedback from lots of people with lots of different perspectives; all of which lead me to my current position. As is this case with any position or opinion I hold, I try to do so loosely with a willingness to change my mind based on any new information that I might learn.

Philosophically, I love the idea of a large body of citizens representing the town and making the big decisions. I love the concept of Town Meeting. In practice, however, it seems that while there have been improvements in our town's practice of Town Meeting, it is still not nearly as efficient as it should be. Not only was there consistent feedback during the TGSC information-gathering process that TM takes too long but there was also plenty of feedback that people didn't feel like they actually had the ability to affect change. Many of these people feel like the same group of long-standing TM members take up most of the time. For me, the whole point of having a Town Meeting form of government is that you get a diverse set of viewpoints that contribute to a better outcome because those viewpoints represent a wide range of perspectives for those who don't participate in our town's government.

It just doesn't seem to be working the way it should. There seems to be a trend where fewer and fewer people want to volunteer their time. We have precincts that regularly struggle to get people to run. Based on the feedback received, there is also a shortage of members who are fully prepared to make these hugely important decisions. This all fights counter to the philosophy of what Town Meeting should be accomplishing for Natick.

I've been thinking through what kinds of solutions might work, in my opinion. Would a reduction in the size of Town Meeting help? Is this just a function of the people currently serving vs the structure of our Town Meeting?

I played out, in my head, what happens if we were a 90-member (for example) Town Meeting rather than 180? I think the result would be the same. I think the people who would fall off are those who already feel like they are wasting their time. This would make it even harder to bring new voices in the mix. It feels like it would have more of a "circle the wagons" effect. As for if it's the people, well, it's already so difficult to find people willing to serve and those who are willing are appreciated and should be valued. We certainly shouldn't push them out either.

Change is hard.

Would a Town Council form of government be better for Natick? I don't know the answer to that. Sticking with Town Meeting, like sticking with anything, because that's what we know, isn't a good enough argument for me. Switching to Town Council because "we just need a change" also doesn't win me over. From an efficiency standpoint, having a Town Council made up of, let's say 13 people, is much more likely to be a body of well-

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informed people who can move faster, as needed, than a body of 180 people. Many of the latter group only engage twice a year. Having a Town Council likely puts more of an emphasis on people with the desire to serve rather than an emphasis on finding people to serve out of necessity. That desire, whether or not we all agree with an individuals' viewpoints on all topics, holds more value for me than "I wrote my neighbor's name in for TM because there were only 4 people on the ballot for 6 seats."

Of course, having fewer people serving as the legislative body of Natick comes with its risks and so I'd like to see Natick explore what a Town Council might look like both in terms of how it is structured itself as well as what kinds of implications it has for other boards and committees in town. There is certainly a lot to figure out still but I'm fairly certain we can't just keep operating the same way, even with small tweaks, and expecting for things to improve. It just won't happen.

Linda then spoke to our committee process, which she entered into with an open mind, and that she now feels that we need to seriously consider a change. TM is not responsive, and important needs and opportunities are unaddressed. She also thinks that having TM (and the FinCom) vote on zoning is a problem as well.

She spoke to some recent improvements, but that there are too many people we are turning off. We are losing long-time members with institutional knowledge of town government, and many members are unprepared to make the decisions they need to.

Hillary commented that based on her observations. TM is a great idea in concept, but it does not seem to be working. It's too large, and not truly representative. TM members don't really represent her, but themselves. She would support considering a change from the status quo.

Michael generally agrees with the above, especially the diagnosis of the problems. He would not scrap it without considering whether some of the changes we are recommending could be implemented. Is there a middle option?

Sue noted that a Council would be the legislative body, in place of Town Meeting.

Michael would like to know if we can adjust what we have now.

Dan observed that the structure of TM in most communities has changed to meet needs. But it's cultural in Natick to schedule so many TMs, and we have a lot of people who regard TM as their secondary vocation. He referenced the time spent on the town seal. The choice is reform vs. replace. He is not sure where this goes.

Sue observed that over her last 6 years on the Board, she became concerned about efficiency and Town Meeting's ability to make thoughtful decisions. She leans towards a council. We need a stronger manager position.

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John Petrin observed that we have touched upon many of the points of discussion. At what level is the governance structure meeting the needs of the people? He noted that most communities were still Town Meeting form. Bringing people along was the challenge.

But whatever direction we go, it is important to address the operational and management issues.

Linda asked if there were things we could do to improve TM that we have not already addressed. Carl said no, we have covered it all; and that improvements to TM did not, in his experience, address the underlying problems.

Carl thought that accountability was a problem with TM. He also thinks that the complexity of TM has changed significantly, even in the last ten years. There is minimal deliberation at TM; that is all at the meetings leading up to TM.

Carl added that for the number of TMs that are efficient, most are actually Open TM. He characterized it that for Open TM, people come to vote; for Representative TM, people come to talk.

He concluded that in 20 years, we may not see many Town Meeting forms of government in Massachusetts.

Dan discussed the concentration of power in Natick under the Moderator.

Carol spoke about how she has struggled with this over the last year. TM is appealing and gives people an opportunity to become involved. But it's not working well. There may be ways to improve it. She came into this with an open mind, but now she thinks we need to take a good hard look at our options. This TM has been dysfunctional. The first night went OK, but not since then. It is just not working for the community.

There was further discussion about the lack of engagement, and concerns about how representative it is.

Dan reflected on Carl's statement that TM may cease to exist in MA. Carl expanded on this. Towns are challenged to get people to step up. And the dominant form of local government in the US is council-manager.

Josh discussed some of the constructive changes he has been bring about in Natick through TM. He added that our report should include a road map to considering changes – whether we were to change our form of government or not. John reinforced this point and said we needed to focus both on the form of government, and the changes we need to make to our operations and structure regardless of the form. In discussion he agreed we need to look at incremental changes as well as far-reaching change.

Josh asked, and John answered about the success rate for charter changes. Without having numbers handy, it was an uphill task. John also reinforced the need for incremental changes

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and not to tie them together. Don't defer changes just because we are looking at a big picture change. You need to do both.

Dan reinforced that we need to do both.

Linda asked if we were going to vote on this tonight; the consensus was that we would not, but that over the course of the coming weeks we would be in a position to do so.

Josh spoke to the report as a vehicle for sharing the committee consensus, and that in sharing our individual views we can make some personal recommendations. As a committee we can make recommendations about process as well.

Report

We will cover the report at a future meeting. Linda and Dan volunteered to work on it with Josh.

Minutes

We will take up outstanding minutes at the next meeting.

On a motion by Dan, seconded by Linda the meeting was unanimously adjourned by a roll call vote 9:01 PM.

Respectfully submitted,
Joshua Ostroff, Clerk

Town Governance Study Committee (TGSC)
Values and Principles for Evaluating Governance Options and Recommendations
May 8, 2023

The TGSC, in looking at options and making recommendations for strengthening Natick's governance structure, did so using the lens of the following values and principles:

1. Promote a citizen-based representative governance structure.

The TGSC believes that community-based organizations, civic associations, community foundations, and grassroots groups provide for effective public engagement and problem-solving efforts that can inform elected and appointed officials in the pursuit of their duties to govern the community. Residents should be fully informed and invited to take part in public affairs. In supporting a citizen-based governance structure, Town officials need to also consider that a large number of formal committees may sometimes lead to an overlap of committee charges and confusion among residents as to the policy direction of the community.

The size of the Town's legislative body and committee structure should be sufficient to support a citizen-based representative governance structure.

2. Provide for accountability through appropriate checks and balances to operations.

The TGSC believes that the chief policy makers are entrusted with the fiduciary responsibility for the Town of Natick and, as such, should provide review and oversight of the budget and financial affairs. The TSGC advocates for a strong centralized policy-making body for the Town that will allow residents to clearly identify accountability for Town affairs. Further, the TGSC believes that the governing structure should be clear that the chief executive/administrative officer administers the budget and manages the work programs and spending of all municipal departments within the policy goals of the chief policy makers and appropriations made by the legislative body.

3. Value and encourage institutional knowledge and continuity among policy leaders and Town staff.

The TGSC believes that Natick benefits from having continuity among its policy leaders and Town staff, even while encouraging participation by those residents not previously engaged. The Town's governance structure should be one that values, encourages, and promotes institutional knowledge through regular training for elected officials and staff and meaningful and broad-based goal-setting among key officials. Communications among and between boards and committees will provide for more comprehensive policy discussions and satisfaction by committee/board members. Further, Town officials need

to be mindful that the number and length of public meetings can discourage individuals' willingness to serve.

Public boards and committees, particularly the chief elected officials, should focus on establishing policies and evaluating programs and services rather than being mired in the day-to-day operations, which should be under the direction of the chief executive/administrative officer and senior staff to best utilize the talents of Town employees.

4. Promote an organizational structure that supports effectiveness, efficiency, economy, and financial accountability.

The TGSC understands that representative government, in general, and town government specifically is meant to be a methodical, reasoned and consensus building approach to governance. The TGSC believes that policy makers and administrative leaders should regularly review their policies and procedures with an eye towards improving the effectiveness, efficiency, economy, and financial accountability of the Town government. This can be accomplished by establishing a process that, on a regular basis, examines in depth a committee charge/role and departmental programs/services, and solicits feedback from residents, user groups, organizations, and advocates of the policy/program. Such processes should also require application of merit-based principles in all staffing decisions, in order to ensure that Town employees are not only held to high standards but are rewarded for meeting and exceeding goals and objectives.

5. Support regional collaborations for issues that overlap municipal boundaries.

The TGSC believes that policy makers should actively participate in policy matters that cross municipal boundaries (e.g., transportation, water resources). Senior administrative staff should regularly look for opportunities where regional cooperation can lead to improved programs and services for residents.

6. Continue and promote a non-partisan governing structure.

Massachusetts General Laws provide for non-partisan municipal elections. The TGSC supports a governance structure that values problem solving and collaboration among policy makers over partisan platforms and positions.

7. Promote civic engagement, participation and partnering with residents.

The TGSC believes that civic engagement and participation are key to a citizen-based governance structure. Yet citizen engagement and participation do not happen on their own. They require a thoughtful, concerted and coordinated effort to reach and engage residents, particularly ones who have not otherwise been involved in Town affairs or have been marginalized from Town affairs. For example, outreach to school-based organizations (PTO/PTA), DEI groups, and organizations, and the creation of citizen

academy type training programs can encourage participation of residents who have not previously been engaged.

8. Promote a governing structure that encourages diversity, social equity, environmental justice and inclusion for all community members.

The TGSC supports a governance structure that provides for the development of principles of equitable engagement to ensure that all persons and groups have meaningful and comprehensive opportunities to be involved. The Town should strive to have the executive and legislative bodies reflect the diversity of the community.

9. Foster a governance structure that provides for integrity in all actions.

The TGSC believes that integrity, transparency, and ethical behavior are key factors in having broad-based community support for elected and appointed officials and municipal programs and services. As such, the TGSC recommends that the governance structure encourages the highest ethical ideals through written and enforced policies and procedures.

Note: These principles and accompanying notes are largely based on the research and recommendations of the National Civic League in the development of the Model City Charter and reflect many of the comments and results of the interviews and surveys undertaken by the TGSC.