

TOWN COUNCIL STUDY COMMITTEE MINUTES

Date: March 20, 2024

Time: 3:00pm-5:00pm

Meeting called to order by: Jeffery Carlson

IN ATTENDANCE

Jeffery Carlson, Beau Barber, Rachel Mandle, Curtis Barnes, Tom Dixon, Jill Vieth, Donna Martino, Caroline Baltzer

APPROVAL OF AGENDA

The agenda for the March 20, 2024 Town Council Study Committee meeting was approved by unanimous vote.

APPROVAL OF MINUTES

The minutes for the March 6, 2024 Town Council Study Committee meeting were approved by unanimous vote.

PRESENTATION OF GUESTS-JOHN BRESHER, BRIAN TURBITT, AND SARAH ALGER

- I. Discussion with John Brescher, (Former) Chair of Government Study Committee (3:05-3:37pm)

Summary-

John Brescher, former chair of the government study committee, highlighted the strengths and weaknesses of the current town government structure:

Strengths:

The current structure embodies open democracy, allowing everyone to have a voice and participate in decision-making during town meetings.

It fosters community engagement and investment, as all individuals could contribute to the governance process.

Weaknesses:

Despite its openness, there is a concern about the level of voter preparedness and information. Many participants may not be adequately informed about the issues being discussed, leading to less efficient debates and decision-making.

Town meetings have become more of an educational forum rather than a platform for informed decision-making, indicating a need for better civic education and voter preparation.

Overall, while the current structure allows for inclusivity and participation, there's a recognized need for improved voter education to enhance the effectiveness of town meetings. The government study committee refrained from making a specific recommendation for change but suggested that further focused study on the topic is warranted.

Based on John's comments, he highlighted several reasons for Nantucket having a high number of citizen warrant articles at town meetings:

Civic Engagement: There is a strong sense of civic engagement on Nantucket, with residents actively seeking to improve their community through participation in town meetings and proposing articles.

Zoning: Zoning issues, including both technical amendments and substantive changes, contribute significantly to the number of warrant articles. Zoning regulations are continually evolving, leading to frequent adjustments and updates.

Sewer Districting: Nantucket's advanced state in sewer districting and expansion also generates a considerable number of warrant articles related to sewer infrastructure development and expansion projects.

The discussion encompassed various topics related to town governance, focusing primarily on the comparison between open town meetings and town councils.

There was deliberation on the efficiency and effectiveness of open town meetings versus town councils, with considerations for factors like uninformed voters, legislative speed, and the need for more frequent decision-making.

The potential benefits of transitioning to a town council model were discussed, including increased efficiency, streamlined processes, and the opportunity for more consistent engagement from non-voting taxpayers.

Concerns were raised about sacrificing direct democracy for efficiency, with an emphasis on the importance of educating voters about the potential changes and their impact on civic engagement.

The idea of maintaining elements of town meeting participation, such as allowing citizens to call special meetings, was proposed as a way to balance the benefits of both systems.

Specific examples from other municipalities, such as Barnstable's use of both town meetings and council meetings, were cited to illustrate different approaches to governance.

The conversation touched on the significance of citizen warrant articles, particularly regarding zoning and sewer districting, as well as the unique challenges and opportunities presented by Nantucket's community dynamics.

Overall, the discussion highlighted the complexities of town governance and the need for careful consideration of the strengths and weaknesses of different models to best serve the needs of Nantucket residents.

II. Discussion with Brian Turbitt, Town of Nantucket Director of Finance (3:37-4:12pm)

Summary-

Brian Turbitt, the Director of Municipal Finance, provides insights into the current town government structure and potential changes.

Open Town Meeting Format: Brian sees the open town meeting as a positive aspect of the current government structure, emphasizing its democratic nature and the opportunity it provides for diverse citizen participation.

Challenges with Open Town Meeting: While acknowledging the benefits, Brian also highlights challenges such as the time-consuming nature of town meetings, especially for attendees, and the internal workload involved in preparing for them.

Benefits of Transitioning to a Town Council: Brian suggests that while there might be marginal financial benefits to transitioning to a Town Council, he doesn't believe there would be a significant enhancement in flexibility or efficiency.

Potential Changes to Quorum Requirements: Brian discusses the possibility of modifying Quorum requirements for town meetings to facilitate smoother transactions, particularly for special town meetings.

Streamlining Town Meeting: Brian expresses uncertainty about how town meetings could be streamlined further, emphasizing their importance in giving everyone a voice. He suggests that while initiatives like babysitting services could encourage participation, the moderator already does a good job in keeping meetings efficient.

Citizen Participation in Budgeting: Brian notes that there is active citizen participation, especially in the lead-up to town meetings, with some citizens preferring to participate directly at the meeting rather than through other channels.

Concerns with Citizen Warrant Articles: Brian acknowledges the issue of citizen warrant articles that may not be implementable, prompting a discussion about whether stricter criteria should be applied to such articles.

Overall, Brian's comments reflect a balanced perspective on the strengths and challenges of the current government structure, as well as considerations for potential changes.

III. Discussion with Sarah Alger, Moderator for the Town of Nantucket Annual Town Meeting (4:02-4:46)

Summary-

Sarah Alger, the moderator, believes that the town meeting is the purest form of democracy, allowing citizens to have meaningful input into their government beyond just voting. She sees benefits in the current form but acknowledges challenges like low participation, especially among busy citizens. When discussing the possibility of transitioning to a Town Council, she expresses concerns about disengagement and potential political issues, noting that the current system provides flexibility despite its limitations.

Regarding succession planning, Sarah mentions grooming potential successors and engaging younger individuals in understanding the process, although she admits uncertainties about who would want to take on such roles. She also addresses challenges in increasing participation, such as logistical issues with childcare and transportation.

When asked about adapting to modern communication methods, Sarah explains that Massachusetts law currently limits electronic participation in town meetings but suggests that a representative town meeting format could offer more flexibility in this regard. She praises the implementation of electronic voting but acknowledges the need for changes in state law to enable broader electronic participation.

Lastly, Sarah briefly discusses the potential benefits of studying representative town meeting models, highlighting the possibility of ensuring better attendance and commitment from elected representatives. However, she admits that she hasn't extensively researched this topic.

- **Responsibilities:** Sarah Alger discussed her duties as the moderator, including overseeing meetings, ensuring quorum, and managing the voting process.
- **Significance of Town Meetings:** She emphasized the importance of town meetings as a fundamental aspect of democracy, providing citizens with a direct role in local governance.
- **Concerns about Town Council:** Alger expressed concerns about the potential drawbacks of a Town Council system, fearing it might lead to rapid decision-making without sufficient citizen input.
- **Engaging Younger Individuals:** She highlighted the need to involve younger individuals in town government and mentioned efforts to mentor potential successors like Chantá-Renée Blas Murphy.
- **Non-binding Articles:** Alger addressed frustrations regarding non-binding articles on the warrant, explaining that once an article qualifies, it must be included, although she attempts to inform sponsors of its non-binding nature.
- **Challenges with Attendance:** She discussed challenges related to maintaining attendance at town meetings and explored potential solutions such as providing childcare and transportation.
- **Electronic Voting:** Alger commended the adoption of electronic voting by the select board as a positive step forward.
- **Transition to Representative Town Meeting:** She suggested that transitioning to a representative form of town meeting could offer new opportunities for participation and engagement.

PRESENTATION BY THE COLLINS CENTER MEMBERS ANTHONY WILSON, MEL KLECHNER, AND PATRICIA LLOYD

Here's a summary of the discussion with Anthony Wilson and his colleagues from the Collins Center:

Anthony Wilson provided an overview of how the Collins Center can assist the committee, including research, best practices, and discussions between meetings.

They highlighted the importance of understanding terminology and offered to provide education on various forms of government.

Mel Klechner emphasized the need to tailor services based on the committee's needs and expressed interest in understanding their goals.

Patricia Lloyd shared initial thoughts on resident participation mechanisms and the necessity of precincts in a representative town meeting.

There was a discussion on electronic voting, with examples from communities like Brookline and Reading during the pandemic.

The committee members expressed varying opinions on potential changes to the form of government, with some emphasizing the need for a compelling reason.

Questions were raised about the process for changing the form of government, with the Collins Center offering advice on the special act route and individual decisions involved.

The committee agreed to move forward with the contract pending approval from the select board and to continue discussions with the Collins Center.

COMMENT FROM THE TCSC, COLLINS CENTER AND PUBLIC (4:46-5:05PM)

- Discussion centers on various forms of government: town meetings vs. representative town meetings.
- Emphasis on needing compelling reasons to change the form of government.
- Importance of understanding the process before proceeding with recommendations.
- Consideration of different tracks for making changes: Charter commission vs. special act.
- Need to consider individual decisions involved in proposed changes.
- Plan to seek approval from select board for pending contract and continue discussions for thorough understanding before decisions are made.

Motion to adjourn made at 5:05pm.