

**CHARTER COMMISSION**

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TOWN HALL  
238 Danbury Road  
Wilton, CT 06897

**CHARTER COMMISSION**

**August 11, 2008**

**Meeting Room "B"**

**Wilton Town Hall**

**PRESENT:** Robert Russell, Michael Kaelin, Paul Burnham, Marilyn Gould,  
Louise Herot, Toni Lee, Douglas Levene, Chris Weldon

**GUESTS:** New Canaan First Selectman Jeb Walker; First Selectman William Brennan

**OTHERS:** Justin Reynolds, Wilton Bulletin

Chairman Bob Russell called the meeting to order at 7:10 p.m.

**Approval of Minutes:** Upon motion by Mr. Levene, the minutes of the July 10, 2008 were unanimously approved as presented.

**First Selectman Jeb Walker of New Canaan**

Mr. Walker advised that the Chairman of the Town Council of New Canaan was unable to be present.

Mr. Walker advised that New Canaan revised their Charter three years ago, effective the first of 2006. It was moderately successful in terms of achieving the desired results but he feels they did not go nearly far enough in the revisions that were made. There was a lot of clean up that needed to be done and that part was easy. The strategic part, the mission and purpose of the town government wasn't part of the equation specifically enough to allow people to really take a hard look at things. He believes that there were certain things that the Republican majority (of which he is a part) was not interested in changing. For example, he is Chairman of the Board of Finance which is appointed, not elected, and no one was interested in making that change. There are some drawbacks to holding both positions, because he is ex-officio in the role, he sets the agenda but does not necessarily manage the agenda. There is almost a built in conflict of interest. He cannot vote unless there is a tie. The Charter Commission tended to look at some specific items. For

example, there was a wish to separate Parks & Rec in to two separate entities. All of the updating according to State Statute went well. In his view, some of the main issues, like addressing an elected or appointed Board of Finance, was never discussed. New Canaan's budget has tripled in the last 15 years and so they are a different community. The demand for social services, an aging population, none of those things got to be part of the mix.

Their government organization has a three member board of selectmen, eight member board of finance, and a 12-member town council (legislative body). The town council often feels like they are "observers" rather than part of the system because they get the budget after the board of selectmen and board of finance, and they can reject it or make limited reductions. Their primary responsibility is to deal with ordinance related issues, in response to requests from Selectman's office. Any activity regarding town property requires their approval. Referenda typically come about only on a major initiative. The last referendum was on a \$20 million appropriation to buy a park. People can petition for a referendum under fairly easy circumstances but seldom do that.

Borrowing is more the work of the board of finance than it is the town council. It does not require a town wide vote for bonding, nor for the budget. Although someone can call for a referendum, it doesn't happen.

The town council is elected at large and it typically breaks out along party lines. They meet once per month. How does the public at large have an opportunity to participate? The biggest problem is energizing public participation. There are meetings on particular topics if it is really hot, and they may get 50 people attending. It's frustrating when people say they have no idea what is being done but do not choose to participate. Mr. Walker writes an op ed once per month and meetings are broadcast on cable.

During the last election, there were four seats open on the town council, but no contests. What about unaffiliated? Probably a third of the registered voters are unaffiliated, maybe more. Any participation in town government, boards or commission? The chairman of P&R is unaffiliated and the appointed chairman of planning & zoning is unaffiliated. The terms are four years for town council members. They have a legislative body that has a longer term than the executive (2 years). A first selectman is somewhat crippled by having a shorter term than the town council, if you look at nothing but the budget process. The charter revision did not consider the four year term for first selectman during this past charter revision but he would wish that they had. All three selectmen were new in 2007.

The BOS and BOE create their respective budgets. The BOE budget goes through the BOS for review and comment and then both budgets are passed on to the board of finance (8 members with 4 alternates) and then the town council. A difficulty is the impact on the employees, having to be available for a lot of meetings. After the last budget cycle, he asked the town council, BOF and BOS to join him in off-site meeting on Saturday and of 24 participants, all but two showed up and gave up a whole day Saturday. Out of that came three task forces - one to look at the budget process and how to streamline; one to look at Best Practices; and one Master Planning Framework Task Force. All three are underway and having great results.

Presentations to the board of finance are done by the school superintendent and board of selectmen, with department heads. The BOE presents its budget to the BOS for review and comment before presenting to the BOF. The board of finance has line-item approval. By the time

it gets to the town council, they cannot increase the budget and can only reduce by a limited amount.

Each year some money is taken from general fund to stabilize the mill rate. This budget year, he wanted to have a higher mill rate because he believes next year will be tougher, with the economy. The budget was held at 4% increase which required \$2 million from the general fund.

His staff includes an administrative officer, who is essentially #2; a CFO and an HR person. The administrative officer works with administrative matters such as contracts, legal matters, insurance activity, works with CIRMA, and special projects that come along.

New Canaan has a senior center that is doing extremely well. It is becoming self-sustaining in some programs. The teen center, when established, relied on a good deal of parent participation and that interest has waned. He is negotiating with the YMCA which is incredibly successful, and hoping to have them taking a more active role. The teen center is a financial burden on the town. Where it is located, behind Town Hall in a parking lot, has become a problem for the neighborhood. Two wings were added to Senior Center two years ago – probably 6-7,000 sq ft. It is now more a community center because it caters to almost everyone. The senior program is the predominant program. They have their own board but the P&R employees see to the scheduling and it is included in the P&R budget.

The dog park has been an amazing success, although he was skeptical at first. A group was the impetus behind getting it done. They were very dedicated and have followed through. They were made “deputies” so they are covered by the town’s insurance.

Anything you would like to change in Charter? Personally, he does not like the three person board of selectmen. If he wants to meet and discuss something with the member of the opposing political party, it has to be posted as a meeting. He would prefer five members, with four-year terms. He also believes that board of finance should be elected.

What about the different sections in the Charter for the different boards/commissions? In Wilton, we have those as separate ordinances. Is there a reason why all of those are in the Charter where it is cumbersome to change? Selectman Walker said there is some thought about doing more things with ordinances.

Another thing that he would change is to have one emergency/safety commission, combining Fire, Police and Ambulance. He feels there could be cost savings in negotiating contracts.

Like many towns, New Canaan has difficulty in finding volunteers to serve on boards and commissions. They have an environmental commission that handles inlands-wetlands. By ordinance, they are establishing a conservation commission.

The Selectmen appoint most boards and commissions. The board of education, the board of selectmen, board of assessment appeals, and the town council are the only elected positions. All other boards are appointed.

Thanks were extended to First Selectman Jeb Walker and he left the meeting at 8:10 pm.

It was noted that New Canaan is the second town heard from where the board of selectmen have some say over the board of education budget. New Canaan does not have Town Meetings so they have essentially closed out public participation except in elections.

**Discussion of Charter Ideas from Commission Members –**

Marilyn Gould remembers when it was not allowed by the Town for members of Town Committees to also serve on boards, then in their own way can perpetuate their view. The problem here is apathy, partly because there are no contests. Everyone says they can't do anything, because everything is a closed society – Republicans and Democrats. It is important to get more people and have a more open process. We should have contested elections. One suggestion is to have a separate election for First Selectman.

Doug Levene reported on his contact with Peter Sielman, a grad student at U Conn and former selectman of Salem, CT. He is working on a way to allow public participation and voting at Town Meetings via the internet.

It was suggested that we do live TV broadcasts of Town Meetings if technically possible.

Town Counsel will be asked to review sections of our charter that reference state statutes for consistency.

Louise was thanked for her detailed work on suggested changes and clarifications to the current charter.

Meeting adjourned 8:55 pm.

Jan Andras  
Recording Secretary  
(not present – minutes taken from audio recording)