

Minutes of the Charter Revision Commission January 14, 2008

Present: Bobbie Kling, Thomas J. Sheridan, Jr., John P. Murphy, Elaine O'Brien, and Douglas Viets. **Absent:** Chairman Ernie Petkovich, Eric Remington and Rodney Dillman
Mrs. Kling called the meeting to order at 7:02 p.m. in the Town Hall lower level conference room.

Citizen's Comment:

None.

Guest Speaker: First Selectman, Scott Lingenfelter:

Mr. Lingenfelter suggested a dialog between himself and the Commission to answer questions the members might have. Mr. Lingenfelter feels Suffield's government runs well. Most of the time, things run smoothly and efficiently. The Town has a good check and balance system in place with a Board of Selectmen, Town Treasurer and Board of Finance.

There can always be personality conflicts which occur within different elected boards and commissions that can slow the pace of government at times, but that is inevitable in government. The lack of continuity in government seems to be an issue with people. Many feel that the First Selectman's position lacks continuity, and therefore, could be corrected by going to a 4 year term for the First Selectman and the Board of Selectmen. He felt the terms for the Board of Selectmen should be staggered to eliminate all 5 members being off the Board at any one time. He also explained that it takes a First Selectman a good year to thoroughly learn the job, then the second term you are running for re-election and if you don't win the election, then there is a break in continuity. He suggested in one municipal election the First Selectman runs for a four year term, then two years later the Board of Selectmen is up for election, therefore, maintain continuity and assuring minority representation laws.

The salary and the commitment of putting an existing career on hold for two years makes the decision for running for First Selectman more difficult. If the commitment was for four years and the salary more attractive, this would encourage qualified professionals to run for the position. He said some Towns compensate their First Selectman based on experience. If you come into the job and don't have any experience you are compensated at a lower amount. This eliminates paying someone a high salary who may not be experienced.

Mr. Lingenfelter felt the Town departments in Suffield work well together. A lot of the Town staff is willing to help out other departments whenever possible.

Several years ago, a full time Human Resource position was created. The new Director which was recently hired after the former H.R. director retired, has municipal H.R. experience. When people complain that Suffield needs professional government and

management, he feels that the Town already has professionals currently on staff which was not the case years ago. We have hired these professionals over the years, as the Town's needs have grown. The hiring of professionals, such as a Finance Director, Economic Development Director, Town Planner, Human Resource Director and Public Works Director, Building Facilities Manager, Youth Services Director, all of which never existed 15 years ago.

Mr. Lingenfelter studied the makeup of other Towns and found that Suffield runs more smoothly than many other Towns, even some of those with Town Administrator or Town Manager forms of government. Suffield has more knowledge and experience on how things are run and how to get the most for our investment, than a lot of other Towns.

There are a few things in the Charter which the Commission should look at. For example, the Emergency Ordinance section of the Charter. Since Katrina, the Federal Government has imposed new Regulations for funding and reimbursements after a Natural Disaster or State of Emergency. In order to get the funding through FEMA or the State of Connecticut, towns must meet certain criteria. There are certain things FEMA and the State would want in a Town Charter. Mr. Lingenfelter gave to the Commission, the name of an Attorney at the State of Connecticut who helps Charter Revision Commissions look at those sections and supplies Towns the draft language which is recommended for the Charter. (Brenda Bergeron; (Brenda.bergeron@po.state.ct.us)

Mr. Lingenfelter said if a new position was created through the Charter, he would like to see a Chief Financial Officer hired for the Town. This person would not just oversee town finances on the Town government side, but also the entire Town's finances, including the Board of Education and WPCA.

Mr. Lingenfelter said the current budget process we have in place needs to run more efficiently. The Board of Finance spends about 6 or more meetings going back and forth between himself and the department heads, reviewing each individual department's budget. Yet, spends only 1 meeting going over the Board of Education's budget which is 2/3 of the entire Budget. With some changes to the Charter, he feels we can get more input over the Board of Education budget. Mr. Lingenfelter felt a Chief Financial Officer created through the Charter, could get more control of this. The school reimbursement issue is still a great concern. He felt that if we had a Chief Financial Officer who oversees all the grants, reimbursements, etc., this issue may not have happened. With the turnover in staff that occurred during that time, (the School Superintendent, the School Business Administrator, the Facilities Manager and Director of Public Works as well as the First Selectman) all leaving during that time, the ball got dropped.

Another issue that Mr. Lingenfelter felt should be changed is a few Boards and Commissions have even number of members (Board of Finance, Police, Fire, Zoning & Planning). All Boards and Commissions should have an odd number of members to avoid tie votes.

Mr. Lingenfelter knows that there is a lot of talk about Suffield needing professional management, and some wanting to go towards a Town Manager/Town Administrator form of government. He personally feels that there is not a need for this in Suffield. We have, for example, professionals running the Board of Education with the position of Superintendent and Business Administrator, but the issue of the \$3.2 million school reimbursement has fallen through the cracks. Mr. Lingenfelter has reviewed a study that shows Towns that have switched to professional management usually in a year or two, taxes have increased 5% on average and services go down 5%. The accountability that Suffield has with an elected form of government is important and believes that residents like to know that the First Selectman and Board of Selectmen and Finance is accountable to them. Whereas with a Town Manager you need a super majority of a Board to get rid of them and that is hard to get. It creates a person who is not accountable to the public. A Town Manager or Administrator just creates another level of bureaucracy and he believes we have too much already.

Ms. O'Brien asked Mr. Lingenfelter if he had reviewed the Commission draft of the description of the Town Administrator. She felt that the Town Administrator would report to the First Selectman and wasn't clear what both these positions would be doing under it. Mr. Lingenfelter said the T.A. would report to the First Selectman, but at times both the First Selectman and Board of Selectmen. He was concerned that if the First Selectman and Board of Selectmen disagreed on an issue, who would the T.A. report to? He feels there was a lot of duplicity in the job description. Ms. O'Brien felt there was a lot of authority being given to the Town Administrator under the job description. Mr. Lingenfelter felt the job description creates two people doing a lot of the same job. You should either admit you want to change to a Town Manager and cut the First Selectman back to a part time or volunteer position, or stay with the form of government we currently have which has served Suffield well over the years. Mr. Sheridan thinks those who are advocating for a Town Administrator feel that the job has gotten too big for the First Selectman to handle. They also use the example of the school reimbursement issue. Mr. Lingenfelter said the Town has grown over the years, but the Town government has also grown with it. We have added more professional positions to handle different areas of expertise. Mr. Lingenfelter said the reimbursement issue is an argument which is brought up often to gain support for a Town Administrator, but if you speak with the prior First Selectman who was in office when this occurred, she has stated that she had nothing to do with the reimbursements. Mrs. Kling felt that blame on this issue should not be laid at the First Selectman's door. This is more of an issue with the Board of Education Administration. The proponents for a Town Administrator said that this would have not happened if there was professional government in place. When in fact, there are professional government with the Board of Education, but we still acquired this problem. Mr. Lingenfelter said they use this issue more like a sword by those who want to attack our current form of government. Mr. Viets stated that we are at the mercy of the quality of the person that is elected. We have had a lot of variations of quality. This was his concern with the current form of government, is that, we don't have any control over the electorate and who they elect. Mr. Lingenfelter said that is a valid concern, but now we have more professionals on staff and more checks and balances in place, so if we do get a First Selectman who is not qualified, the Board of Finance can put a stop to certain things

that an unqualified individuals might try to do. Then at the next election, they can be voted out of office.

Mrs. Kling asked what would be the one major thing he would like to see changed or not changed. Mr. Lingenfelter said he would keep the First Selectman/Board of Selectmen form of government, but would make the term 4 years for continuity.

Ms. O'Brien asked what does he say the role of the Director of Finance is right now? Mr. Lingenfelter said he would like to see this position report directly to the First Selectman and not the Board of Finance and Board of Selectmen. We need one person accountable, not multiple bosses.

Mrs. Kling thanked Mr. Lingenfelter for attending.

Tracking Log:

Item #42 Section 804(D) If a public emergency really exists that threatens the lives, health or property do we want to wait for the Board of Selectmen and the Board of Finance to meet? Should not the First Selectman have emergency expenditure powers up to some threshold? Mr. Sheridan made a motion, seconded by Mr. Viets to move this to the Not Recommended List. All voted in favor with Ms. O'Brien voting opposed. Motion failed.

Item #43 with respect to acceptance of Federal or State grants, should we define what amount is referred to when referencing the adopted Town Budget. The Commission felt we need a definition on what the Budget actually is.

Item #24 Sec. 603(B). The Board of Selectmen may want counsel, other than town counsel to represent the town for matters where specific experience or expertise is required. Ms. O'Brien made a motion, seconded by Mr. Viets to recommend adding the words "or as otherwise directed by the Board of Selectmen." The motion was approved by unanimous vote.

Item #25 Sec. 603 (B) & (C) Is it intended that Town counsel represent ZPC and the Board of Ed. Mr. Viets made a motion, seconded by Mr. Sheridan to move this to the Not Recommended List. The motion was approved by unanimous vote.

Item #89 Require an automatic referendum based on a \$ amount. Mrs. Kling made a motion, seconded by Mr. Viets to move this to the Not Recommended List. The motion was approved by unanimous vote.

Short List

#7 Sec. 302(A) Should the First Selectman's term be extended to 4 years. Should the term of the other Selectmen be extended to 4 years? The Commission wants to get clarification regarding the majority rule on the staggered terms of the Board. The Commission decided to wait until the next meeting when the full Board was in attendance.

Adjournment:

Mrs. Kling made a motion, seconded by Mr. Sheridan to adjourn. The motion was approved by unanimous vote. The meeting adjourned at 9:00 p.m.

Respectfully submitted,

Christine Koren, Recording Secretary

NEXT MEETING: January 21, 2009 at 7 p.m. Town Hall, second floor.