



TOWN OF ELLINGTON

Ad Hoc Government Study Committee

JAMES PRICHARD
CHAIRMAN

HEATHER STAVENS
VICE CHAIRMAN

55 MAIN STREET – PO BOX 187
ELLINGTON, CONNECTICUT 06029-0187

SANFORD COHEN
ELIZABETH FELDMAN
MICHAEL FRANCIS
MARY PERCOSKI
JOHN RIDZON

Ad Hoc Government Study Committee
Special Meeting Minutes
August 25, 2020
Town Hall Meeting Hall

MEMBERS PRESENT: James Prichard, Sanford Cohen, Heather Stavens, Michael Francis,
Elizabeth Feldman

MEMBER PRESENT: Mary Percoski
via ZOOM

MEMBER ABSENT: John Ridzon

OTHERS PRESENT: Lori Spielman, First Selectman; Joseph Wehr and Peg Busse, Board of
Finance; Present via Zoom: David Stavens, Selectman; David Olender,
Board of Finance member

- I. Call to Order: Chairman James Prichard called the meeting to order at 7:00 p.m.
- II. Citizens' Forum [non-agenda items]: No one came forward.
- III. Approval of Minutes – July 28, 2020

MOVED (STAVENS), SECONDED (FRANCIS) AND PASSED UNANIMOUSLY TO APPROVE
THE MINUTES OF THE JULY 28, 2020 SPECIAL MEETING.

- IV. Membership
 - A. Introduction of New Member, Betsi Feldman

Chairman Prichard introduced Elizabeth (Betsi) Feldman, who replaced Dennis Clavet on the
Committee.

- V. Welcome Guest Speaker:

Chairman Prichard welcomed guest speaker John Elsesser, Town Manager, Town of Coventry.
Mr. Elsesser said that he has been serving as the Town Manager of Coventry for 32 years and has been
in the business for 40 years. Prior to this, he served as the Assistant Town Manager in Avon, CT. He

added that his graduate degree in Public Administration along with his experience in other towns prepared him for this position. Mr. Elsesser provided a detailed description of his position.

Mr. Elsesser said that the greatest advantage to a town having a Town Manager form of government is continuity. He said that Coventry had some bad years with a lot of turnover with managers and with council members; therefore, he provided stability when he was hired. He said that the form of government doesn't always guarantee success; it's about the people and it's about the team. He said that his role as Town Manager is to be part of a team and to respect the electoral process.

Mr. Elsesser said that the Town Manager implements policy set by the policy-makers whether or not he or she agrees with the policy. Long-term thinking is a critical role. Short term viewpoint isn't enough. He has been involved in some projects that went on for 20 years and experienced many bumps in the road. Some professional staff members such as Finance Directors, Town Planners, Police Chiefs and others chose to only work for non-political people so they aren't involved in the political swings.

As Town Manager, Mr. Elsesser said he is in charge of all of the staffing including hiring, firing and union negotiations, grants, budget preparation for council review as well as the day-to-day operation of the Town.

Mr. Elsesser said that he prepares the agendas for the Council Chairman to review and approve. He acts as staff to the Council. The Finance Committee is a subcommittee of the Council which meets regularly. He said there is also a Steering Liaison subcommittee that focuses on policy and ordinances. They conduct interviews of Board and Commission members. All Land Use agency appointments are reviewed by this Committee. Coventry has over 300 people serving on Boards and Commissions. They recently eliminated their Insurance Advisory Board, as their purpose was eliminated due to the relationship with CIRMA.

Town Administrators are often former First Selectmen who are able to do the job without having to run for office. They can focus on the work and not the campaign and there's a freedom to it.

In Coventry, the Parks and Recreation program is self-sufficient. The trash collection program is funded off-book. Citizen happiness is very high, as evidenced by community-wide survey results which are compared to similar towns across the nation. Coventry did their last two cycles of the Plan of Conservation and Development in-house, saving the Town between \$40,000 and \$50,000.

Mr. Elsesser reviewed many other benefits of the Town Manager form of government. He then opened the floor to questions.

Mr. Cohen asked what type of contract Mr. Elsesser has with the Town. Mr. Elsesser responded that he has an indefinite contract. He added that the Council can vote to remove him and would need five out of seven Council members to agree and he would leave. He said that it is understood and he would only serve if the Council wants him to. He added that he has a severance package in his contract. Mr. Prichard asked if this is a common contract; Mr. Elsesser said that it's about 50% of the time and then other Towns make different arrangements. He said that his position has a residency requirement which he is not a fan of because it can eliminate good candidates. Some highly qualified people do not want to

relocate their families. He said the important thing is that the Town Manager is within a reasonable distance so he or she can respond when needed.

Peg Busse (37 Abbott Road) asked Mr. Elsesser if there are performance objectives built into his contract and he replied that he has an annual performance evaluation and that the format varies by Council.

Committee members requested information regarding the plan, should Mr. Elsesser leave. Mr. Elsesser said that the Council will vet his replacement. He noted that there are current employees who would step up in the interim, that he keeps them informed on what's going on in Town on a regular basis and he has the power to appoint a temporary replacement should he be out for a temporary time period. He added that not hiring an Assistant Town Manager is a matter of economics. Mr. Elsesser said that part of his job is to keep taxes low and hiring an Assistant Town Manager would add to the cost of running the town.

Mr. Elsesser said that in terms of the organization, he has good staff who know what they're doing; his job is to help steer them but not get too deeply involved unless it's necessary. He added that his style of management includes walking around talking with the staff and that is how you successfully manage. It works more effectively to level the playing field by going to their office and letting them raise the issues and then discussing them. There were 65 employees in 1981 when he took the job and now Coventry has 67 employees, while still adding a lot of services. They are lean but they make it work.

Ms. Stavens asked Mr. Elsesser if he governs by his morals or based on who he wants to please. He responded that you have to govern on your morals or you don't govern. He would decline to do anything asked of him that he considered unethical or illegal and then based on the reaction when he addresses it, he would decide if he was going to step down. He said it's bad enough that people make up the reputation of public officials on Facebook these days, but once you lose your own reputation it's hard to recover. Mr. Elsesser said that anytime there is a new council they go through a goal-setting process and then the goals are agreed upon. He said the Council is made up of elected people and he works for them to serve the public, so their goals matter to him, even if he doesn't agree with them.

Mr. Elsesser acknowledged that the amount of public sector hectoring is so outrageous these days, partly due to COVID-19 frustrations, that staff is resigning over being constantly criticized by the public. Some of the staff no longer want to deal with how difficult things have become as they try to do their jobs. He said that people used to worry about what they said to each other and how they spoke to people, but they don't seem to care lately and it has taken its toll on staff.

Mr. Elsesser said he has been very successful in obtaining grant money, bringing in over \$10,000,000 this year. He said that there is no Board of Finance in Coventry; the Finance Committee of the Council monitors every dime including borrowing and the capital improvement plan and these members bring the information back to the Council. This set-up stops the fighting that can come between the governing body and the Board of Finance. He added that if you have a good financial system, a Board of Finance complicates things. The Council sets the budget and is accountable to the taxpayers via referendum which sets the mill rate, so there's no need for a Board of Finance.

Mr. Elsesser said that he merged two fire departments and now uses Vintech Ambulance for emergency medical services. The Fire Department is 100% volunteer; the ambulance service is subsidized at \$40,000 per year. This is overseen by a paid position who is responsible for fire, emergency medical services and serves as the Emergency Management Director.

Mr. Elsesser said that there is no perfect answer; it's what works for each town. The Committee thanked Mr. Elsesser for his informative presentation.

VI. Unfinished Business

A. Government Study Review

Mr. Prichard asked for comments. Ms. Busse said that she does not know why the Board of Finance (BOF) exists and she would be hard-pressed to prove that they add significant value, based upon how it is structured in the Charter. Ms. Feldman noted that the Town has a very strong Finance Department. Mr. Cohen said that the BOF offers another layer of oversight; Ms. Busse responded that the BOF doesn't even have meetings some months. Mr. Prichard encouraged Ms. Busse to give the new Finance Officer a chance, as it could be completely different going forward after 40 years of doing things the same way. Mr. Prichard noted that the public may be uncomfortable with changing the form of government and removing the BOF. Ms. Stavens asked if Ms. Busse means that the BOF has no value; Ms. Busse said that there is no value added due to the limited things that the BOF is charged with in their role.

Mr. Wehr explained that most decisions are made before they get to the BOF. It was stated that it's important to provide the residents the opportunity to have a say at the referendum; Mr. Prichard and Ms. Spielman reminded the members that in recent years, turnout for budget referendums has been extremely low. Mr. Prichard added that years ago, it would take several referendum votes to pass the budget; now hardly anyone shows up. It's important because if you remove the referendum option, residents will complain, but it doesn't seem important to them when it comes time to vote. Ms. Spielman added that the Annual Town Budget meeting, where the budget is explained, sees a very small number of people, unless there is a project in the budget that residents are interested in, such as turf fields. Ms. Feldman added that when you have a small turnout at referendum and that small number of people are making decisions for a town of 16,000 people, it is not representative. Mr. Francis said it is representative of the people who care. Mr. Wehr said there is a pretty small group that runs the Town and it is not representative.

Ms. Spielman added that when the BOS is provided with suggested language for the body of their motions, it can appear that decisions have been made, but the reality is that the suggested wording is provided to the BOS members only so that no details that are necessary to the motion get missed. The wording can be, and is, changed to reflect the decision of the BOS. It's to assist in the flow of the meeting and to be sure details are included. Ms. Feldman added that as an outsider in the room it does look like the decisions have been made. Mr. Wehr said that on the other hand, things have been thought out and prepared before going into the meeting so there isn't chaos. Ms. Busse said that of course conversations happen prior to meetings on topics, but it's necessary and not political in nature. Mr. Wehr said it makes sense that Mr. Rachek meets with department heads prior to BOF meetings so he understands what's being brought forward.

Ms. Busse said that her issue is with Town departments and their ability to move money from one line item to another within their budget. She said she has asked if the BOF could scrub the budget line-by-line. She said that if a department has to move money from one of their line items to fund another, they don't have to ask permission of the BOF to do this. She said that she has brought this forward and was told by the Chairman of the Board of Finance that the department heads have the latitude to do this as long as they do not go over their bottom line. She said she was told to let the Department Heads do their jobs as it is not her job to scrub the budget at the line item level.

Ms. Feldman said that as one of the people who oversees the Town Ellington Volunteer Fire Department (EVFD) operating budget, she is absolutely held to transparency by Finance when EVFD goes over on a line item and she has to account for it. Ms. Busse said she understands that, and there are some departments that are better than others. She said after talking over the years with three different Town Finance Directors, they all agree that as long as the Department Heads balance the budget within their department, or return unspent money, there is no issue. Ms. Feldman added that she is required to provide documentation to the Finance Office. Ms. Spielman added that Ms. Pignataro provides a detailed monthly report that shows where each department budget stands with the explanation included and Ms. Busse said it's too late at that point.

It was decided that the Committee would like to hear from more speakers, including some Town Administrators.

VII. Review Action Items

- A. Michael Rosen, Town Manager in Tolland, CT will be a guest speaker at the September 15, 2020 meeting.

Mr. Prichard suggested that the Committee members review the Town of Coventry Charter, which can be found on their website.

He reminded the members that Mr. Rosen will be presenting on September 15, 2020.

VIII. Adjournment

MOVED (FRANCIS), SECONDED (COHEN), AND PASSED UNANIMOUSLY TO ADJOURN THE MEETING AT 8:50 PM.

Submitted by: _____

LouAnn Cannella
Recording Secretary