
Final Report

Town Governance Study Committee

Town of Northfield's Annual Town Meeting — May 6, 2019

VERSION 3.1 — APRIL 29, 2019

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Committee Members

Brian Brault, Bee Jacque (Clerk), Bob MacEwen,
Tammy Pelletier (Chair), Bernie Porada,
Emily Stevens (Vice Chair), Jeremy Underwood

Overview

We set out in July 2018 to revisit the work & recommendations of the 2013 Committee and to determine progress & needs. We met 26 times — usually every other week, sometimes weekly. Discussions were lively & meetings numerous, but we enjoyed our work:

- We surveyed department heads, boards and committees and anyone else in town who was interested. The survey asked about the 2013 recommendations but also sought input on current concerns and issues.
- Our first Public Session was held last fall. In January, two members spoke at a Senior Center breakfast. We held another Public Session on March 13th where we presented our findings and potential recommendations. The response was generally positive and we used the additional feedback to shape our recommendations.
- We met with the Selectboard, the Highway Superintendent, the Board of Assessors, the Town Clerk, the Town Administrators (interim & new) plus we interviewed officials from 8 towns with 5 Selectboard members.
- We reviewed relevant documents: the 2013 Final Report; *Handbook for Massachusetts Selectmen, Third Edition* (published by Massachusetts Municipal Association © 1998); *Framework for considering elected and appointed offices, Rev 05.12.11* (Edward J. Collins, Jr. Center for Public Management, University of Massachusetts Boston); and the Town of Hadley's *Service Delivery Plan, June 29, 2018*.

We would like to thank all who came to our public sessions, responded to our survey, and took the time to meet with us and answer our questions. Thanks also to the 2013 Committee members and to those who reached out individually to us. The process has been truly informative, energizing, and encouraging.

Selectboard Size

The 2013 Committee thought increasing the Selectboard size from 3 to 5 “should definitely be addressed” after the Town Administrator position had been in place for a few years. In 2019, we too reached consensus on **3 to 5** after several months of research and discussion.

As we wrapped up our community input process in Northfield, we reached out to 8 towns in Massachusetts with 5-person boards and asked about their experiences. The only town overlapping with the 2013 work was Dalton. Similar to the 2013 findings, no one suggested a return to a 3-member board. We propose, also in line with 2013 findings:

Five (5) Selectboard members would bring more perspectives and points of view to the table, especially for policy-making and priority-setting.

This creates an opportunity for:

- Generating a variety of ideas from more skill sets and areas of expertise
- Increasing the ability to conduct meetings and Town business if one or two members are ill or away
- Distributing workload — members could attend other meetings or create subcommittees
- Greater collaboration — a majority vote would require three instead of two

The only concern was: ‘will there be enough candidates?’ Yet the 2013 Committee documented in 7 out of 9 elections, there were 2 candidates for each open position. We think the potential benefits, the number of enthusiastic citizens, and the 1-2 year implementation period outweigh this concern.

*Voting yes to increase the Selectboard size 3—>5 at Town Meeting puts it for a vote at the **next election** and asks for Legislature approval.*

In looking at actions taken by the Town since 2013, we...

Affirm the creation of the Town Administrator position. Feedback was very supportive of the position. We did receive, however, numerous comments about the turn-over in administrators and the hiring of those with lengthy commutes — basically, a lack of longevity. This resulted in infrequent employee communication and inconsistent personnel procedures, especially in conducting employee evaluations. We communicated these concerns in meetings with the Town Administrators, both interim & new.

In general, appointing a position expands hiring beyond town boundaries. This is important (especially for small towns) when the responsibilities of the position require candidates with specialized training, experience, & expertise.

**Appointing
vs.
Electing**

Affirm the change of the Treasurer & Tax Collector positions from elected to appointed by the SelectBoard. As noted in 2013 and reiterated in our research, these positions are technical & rule-based and follow a general trend within the Commonwealth toward appointment of financial positions.

Recommend keeping the Assessors Clerk appointed by the Board of Assessors. Assessing expertise is technical & rule-based and the Clerk should be selected by those with the expertise. We do recommend a clear connection with the Administrator for personnel procedures and operational purposes.

Recommend no change to the Town Clerk position at this time, but advise an assessment of town needs again at a future point. The demands & responsibilities of this position — especially voting & public records — are increasingly technical & rule-based. It is important to balance the desire for an independent, elected voice in Town Hall against the pool of Town citizens available and qualified to run for the position.

Bylaws & Services

We found overwhelming support for a comprehensive set of governmental bylaws to replace Northfield's few pages of inadequate and unenforceable legal rules. There is also a need to create a procedure manual to lay out implementation details. We learned the Town Clerk is already working toward a review of bylaws.

This multi-year effort should update rules already in place, address gaps, and specify enforcement (who enforces & to what extent). The end result would be a searchable, up-to-date database with printed copies to be kept in sync.

We affirm the 2013 recommendation to create a comprehensive set of governmental bylaws & a procedure manual. We urge the Selectboard to form a committee to move this necessary & overdue effort forward.

We also found overwhelming support for access to Town Hall offices & services at night. Many find it difficult to get to Town Hall during the day.

Additionally, many Board & Committee members expressed a need for:

- Supplies: paper, ink, printer, photocopier, email addresses
- Procedural & technical support: getting started as a committee, email distribution lists, timeline for reports & articles for Town Meeting, electronic access for submitting meeting agendas and minutes.

We recommend the Town establish one night a week when all offices & services accessed by citizens & committees are open at the same time.

2019 RECOMMENDATIONS AT A GLANCE

1. Recommend increasing the size of the Selectboard from 3 to 5 for more perspectives & viewpoints at the table for policy-making & priority-setting.

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at Town Meeting
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and asks for Legislature approval.*

2. Affirm the 2013 recommendation to create a Town Administrator position.
3. Affirm the 2013 recommendation to change the Treasurer & Tax Collector positions from elected to appointed by the SelectBoard.
4. Recommend keeping the Assessors Clerk appointed by the Board of Assessors.
5. Recommend no change to the Town Clerk position at this time, but advise an assessment of town needs again at a future point.
6. Affirm the 2013 recommendation to create a comprehensive set of governmental bylaws & a procedure manual. We urge the Selectboard to form a committee to move this necessary & overdue effort forward.
7. Recommend the Town establish one night a week when all offices & services accessed by citizens & committees are open at the same time.

*This report & other documents plus minutes & agendas are available
on the Town Governance Study Committee's web page:
<https://www.northfieldma.gov/town-governance-study-committee-2018>*