



WF CRC re:Cap #3 December 15, 2020

THE TAKEAWAY: *CRC members and observers discussed how Watertown town government could be more transparent, responsive, and accountable to the public interest, beyond financial resilience and stability. In doing so, they realized they needed to learn more about existing roles, responsibilities, and relationships; performance evaluation mechanisms; and what other Massachusetts cities and towns are doing. They also realized that the form of town government can't be fully separated from people and processes — and that questions of purpose hover over everything.*

“It’s a riddle wrapped in a mystery, inside an enigma, but perhaps there is a key.”

—Winston Churchill, 1939

Churchill [was speaking of Russia](#) when he uttered those words, but judging by Monday’s 2½-hour public Zoom meeting of Watertown’s [Home Rule Charter Review Committee](#), he might as well have been speaking of Watertown’s town government. Throughout the meeting, both CRC members and attendees expressed dismay numerous times over the lack of transparency, accountability, or even knowledge of who’s responsible for what in Watertown public life.

Although the meeting’s published objective was to continue to discuss [emerging themes from previous meetings](#) — the focus that night was supposed to be on the current power balance between the legislative and executive branches of Watertown’s government, and Watertown’s “shared vision” — many CRC members and Zoom viewers described a government that appears to disregard residents’ concerns. People raise questions and issues, they said, but typically are rebuffed, finding more finger-pointing than answers. Residents find themselves stymied and end up going in circles rather than making productive progress. Because of that, the question that dominated the evening was, “*Why is this so?*”

PARADIGM, PURPOSE & PRINCIPLES

One answer that emerged: In defending the *status quo*, some town officials prefer to measure “success” solely in quantifiable terms, downplaying the quality of life and the degree of civic trust in local government operations. With money as the only metric, it becomes harder for residents and CRC members to widen the accountability framework to other areas that make the public interest well served.

CRC member **Anne Fitzpatrick** put it succinctly, “In residents’ opinion, the Town Manager is shielded by the Town Council.” After wondering how the manager’s performance is evaluated each year, Fitzpatrick then

asked for insight into the process. (The Town Manager reports to the Town Council, while departments report to the Town Manager.) In doing so, she tackled head-on the popular argument that Watertown's fiscal resilience and stability is the sole gauge of accountability. Performance excellence, she argued — not just for the town manager, but for all town employees and officials — involves more than that. That's because the purpose of town government relies on a bigger framework (or "paradigm") and set of agreements about the kind of community in which residents wish to live, and the principles that support that paradigm. That helps cultivate a sense of purpose that helps to determine whether public employee performance is moving Watertown forward, backward, or just treading water.

"There's a difference between the budget and economic strength of the town, and the reality of living here and how residents experience the town and town employees," she said. "Those are two very different things."

Mixed reviews: The packed CRC [agenda](#) got off to lively start after brief remarks by external adviser

and Watertown resident **Mike Ward**, current director of UMass Boston's [Edward J. Collins Center for Public Management](#). (Watch the WCATV recording [here](#); [Watertown News coverage here.](#))

That's when CRC member **Marcia Ciro**, who's also chairing the newly-created CRC Communications Subcommittee, talked

about Watertown's mixed performance and communication capabilities — including its difficulty producing an updated organizational chart, which maps town departments, offices, commissions, and reporting relationships that can help residents know who does what.

Referring to the Collins-provided background information on governance options and what other Massachusetts towns are doing, Ciro she said, "In reading through the materials, I find it hard to talk about our preference for form without discussing what's working and what isn't.

Are these issues systemic and related to the form of government, or to the ways we're using government? When I see Watertown's government now, it's not very accountable or transparent. It's very opaque.

I was asking myself this week, *If we had a mayor, would I have to wait three months for an organizational chart?* We still don't have it. But I did get the old one tonight.

In response, **Mark Sideris**, CRC chair and Town Council President, defended the move. "That's what we got from the administration today," he said. "We will get [an updated one] from the personnel director when she comes back."

But the issue over who does what — measuring success against performance objectives — wouldn't go away. The current charter doesn't help much, said Town Councilor **John Gannon**. Gannon, who also sits on the CRC's Communications Subcommittee and has a lot of accountability experience with other cities and towns, said "Watertown has devolved into codes and ordinances, rather than specific positions." Referring

UPCOMING MEETINGS: The CRC meets at 6:00 p.m. on the first and third Tuesday of each month. January meetings are slated for **January 5** and **January 19, 2021**. Agendas will be available within 48 hours of each meeting. Sign up for notifications [here](#).

to the current [Home Rule Charter](#), he said, “We’ve gone the pamphlet route, but could be more specific and outline the responsibilities for the executive branch, with specified purposes and goals.”

POLICY, PROGRAM & PRIORITIES

As CRC members continue to grapple with the larger question of whether Watertown should change its form of government — that is, move from an appointed town manager to an elected mayor — they admitted that they couldn’t be sure that a structural shift would boost performance and improve accountability to policy and program priorities established by the Town Council.

In part, that may be due to a limited capacity to get the job done. As CRC member and State Representative **Jon Hecht** pointed out, it’s not an either/or thing, but rather an “additive conversation” — that fiscal stability *and* good communication and accountability go hand in hand. The challenge, he said, was organizational capacity. “We should be asking if the executive branch has what it needs to accomplish its best, and what the legislative branch can do to be supportive.”

Changing the charter may be the key to the enigma of an organizational culture impervious to change, with its mysteries and riddles that continue to baffle residents. But before charter change can occur, everyone needs to understand what currently exists, and why.

Raising popular awareness: As Watertown’s population continues to grow and diversify, knowledge of town government isn’t widespread, so external pressures, even where they exist, are sporadic and not sustained. Residents don’t always know who does what, so don’t know where to go or who to call, should the need arise — with or without an up-to-date map.

“There are many people in town who are unfamiliar with how government works,” said **Tony Palomba**, a CRC member and Town Councilor who’s affiliated with Watertown Forward. “People expect a lot out of the Town Council and Town Councilors. Participation and accountability are valid concerns, but those of us on the inside are not the best to judge.”

PRACTICE, PROCESS & PARTNERS

The meeting was supposed to focus on the remaining two of [four interrelated themes](#) discussed at the previous CRC meeting (see *re:Cap #2* [here](#)). The goal was to identify some of the advantages and disadvantages of a Council–Manager form of governance, in contrast to a Council–Mayor model. The Collins Center submitted a raft of materials to help the CRC do this. (A list of these materials is available on the [CRC page](#) of Watertown’s website.)

Continuing education: To customize that process, a portion of the 12/15 meeting also was spent with CRC members stating what they’d like the Collins team to research. Their proposed topics fell into “structure” and “process” categories, including:

Did You Know?

There are [47 cities](#) in Massachusetts with a council–mayor form of government. Nationally, the [council–manager](#) form is the most popular, but only [six other Mass. municipalities](#) comparable to Watertown’s size use it.

- How other towns address whether it's people or structure that improve engagement, responsiveness, and transparency;
- Examples of effective, efficient mayors (and their opposite) of cities with sound housing, fiscal, and environmental policies — including those with a chief financial officer;
- Academic research citing best practices for effective communication;
- The degree to which state law and other constraints affect the town's capacity to accomplish what it should be accomplishing, and the extent to which there's room to assert local authority, across a range of possibilities — as viewed through the lens of a mayor or town manager form of government;
- Best practices regarding compensation and benefits packages for municipal employees and officials; and
- Examples of where the legislative branch has been strengthened by actions involving full- or part-time work, district or ward representation, length of service, level of staff support to help with constituent service, and ranked-choice voting.

The CRC discussion will continue on January 5, 2021. That's when CRC members and the public will hear from a panel of current and former Massachusetts mayors, managers, and councilors who will talk about their experience and perspectives with different governance structures.

Whether or not that solves the “municipal mystery” problem Anne Fitzpatrick and Marcia Ciro cited remains an open question. “I see a very entrenched old boys club up there,” Ciro said, referring to Town Hall occupants. “They take care of each other.”

HOW TO WEIGH IN: Residents who wish to communicate with the CRC can do so by sending an email to crc@watertown-ma.gov. Questions and responses will be posted on the CRC website.

—by Marcy Murningham, with editing assistance from Vana Pistoftzian

- For more, see Michael C. Smith and Arianna Z.A. Schudrich, [A Study on Structural Changes in Local Government in the Commonwealth of Massachusetts](#), Clark University MPA Capstone Project. Supported by Mass Municipal Managers Association (MMMA) Form of Governance Committee (May 2010)
- See also [“Cities 101: Forms of Municipal Government,”](#) National League of Cities (October 21, 2016)