

Town Governance Study Committee

Stakeholder Interview Report

August 18, 2022

Introduction

The Natick Town Governance Study Committee (TGSC) was appointed by the Select Board on March 16, 2022, with the following stated purpose: “[The TGSC] Purpose is to review the efficacy of the town’s current organizational structure, including the form of government and by-laws and provide recommendations to the Select Board. The committee shall:

- Study the town’s form of government and governance
- Examine models of government in comparable communities
- Identify strengths and weaknesses in Natick’s current government, and recommend any amendments to the charter, bylaws, and governing practices so as to improve the town’s form of government and governance
- Facilitate public engagement on, and the public’s discussion of the committee’s work.”

The TGSC is currently focused on performing research to identify limitations and flaws in our Town government and governance. We are now developing plans to investigate and identify possible changes that could improve or eliminate some or all of these limitations and flaws.

The TGSC has met on April 4, April 11, May 4, May 16, May 23, June 9, July 13, August 4, August 10, and August 15.

This report covers the information-gathering process used to date, provides a breakdown by topic of most frequent responses received, and describes next steps for the committee.

Prior to Collecting the Information

Early in our process, we discussed what aspect(s) of our charge should be addressed first. With input from Michael Ward, Director of the Collins Center at UMass-Boston and Michael Dutton, Chair of the Massachusetts Municipal Managers Association’s Form of Government Committee, the TGSC agreed to undertake key stakeholder interviews to better understand what specific problems Natick may seek to solve in our governance structure or process, prior to considering solutions and studying other forms of municipal governance. We agreed that it was necessary to identify the areas and functions that could be improved before looking into different forms of municipal government that could diminish or eliminate some or all of these problems. Although many if not all of our committee members had opinions about what might be current problems, we recognized that our views are limited, whereas obtaining feedback from key

employees and key volunteers would give us a more comprehensive sense of the issues Natick faces in its governance.

The Information Collection Process

The TGSC decided to perform interviews and collect written information as an initial phase of learning what Town officials, whether employees or elected or appointed leaders, think about the functioning of our Town government. We created a list of 45 key stakeholders; some of whom are current or past town or school employees in leadership positions, while others are current or past elected or appointed volunteers in leadership positions. For this first group, two TGSC committee members were assigned to interview each person on this list, using the following standard list of questions.

- Do you have experience working/serving in other communities? If yes, how many and what was your role in each?
- In your opinion, what aspects of our form of town government and governance work well?
- What aspects of our form of town government structure and governance are not working well or could be improved? (Our committee has not been asked to focus on budget or staff limitations.)
- Are these problems/limitations related to authorities of personnel/boards, are they due to inefficiencies, or are there other reasons?
- What are your ideas for how these could be improved/reformed? What changes would you propose?
- What do you feel strongly should NOT be changed?
- Are there other areas that you think the study committee should specifically address (even if you don't have solutions in mind)?
- What else does the committee need to know?

Note that these questions are open-ended and do not suggest or ask about any specific good or bad aspects of Natick's current form of governance. The committee did not wish to bias any of the respondents by making suggestions. For example, the committee did not ask about Town Meeting, or any Town agencies in particular. All topics mentioned in the Results section of this document were brought up by those being interviewed, not by the interviewers.

Although two members of the TGSC were assigned to each interview, sometimes one of the two assigned interviewers was unable to participate and thus that interview was conducted by one TGSC member. Interviewers individually documented their findings; interviews were not recorded.

The committee subsequently added 16 more stakeholders to the list of those from whom we were requesting feedback. These individuals were emailed the standard questions and offered

the opportunity to either provide their responses in writing, or request an interview with one or two committee members.

Responses to Date

As of July 18, 2022, a total of 61 individuals have received the list of standard questions being asked by the committee in this initial round of information collection. Of these, as of August 11, 2022, 47 have provided responses to the questions either during an interview or in written form, 3 have indicated they are unavailable to respond, interviews are being scheduled for 2-3 others, 1 has promised written feedback, and the remainder have not yet let us know if they are willing to provide feedback. (Note that most of the individuals in this last group were added to the list in mid-July and may just need more time.)

When stratified by Employee versus Volunteer, the breakdown of those invited and those responding is:

of (past or present) Employees who were asked to provide feedback: 27

of (past or present) Employees who provided feedback to date: 22

of (past or present) Volunteers who were asked to provide feedback: 34

of (past or present) Volunteers who provided feedback to date: 25

If additional responses are received from key stakeholders, this report may be updated.

The key findings have been consolidated in the following text and tables. Due to the open-ended nature of the questions asked, responses varied widely and respondents each used their own terminology. However, when possible, responses have been grouped to show trends.

Much of the information obtained has been stratified into two source groups: Employees (past and present) and Volunteers (elected/appointed and past/present). Due to the relatively small number in each of the following subgroups, no attempt has been made to stratify between past and present employees, past and present volunteers, or elected and appointed volunteers.

We recognize that the contents of this report were obtained from people who are already closely involved in Natick government and may not represent the perspectives of those who are less or not involved. The committee is working on opportunities for others to provide input.

What is Working Well in Natick Government and Governance?

The following paragraphs collect positive feedback received from a variety of the responding stakeholders. The comments are not exact quotes, but are faithful to the comments made.

The term volunteerism was often used by respondents when assessing what is working well. Community engagement was seen as a strength, with Natick considered to be very community minded. Resident volunteers were seen as sophisticated and interested, active and knowledgeable, taking the time to contribute and creating an incredible ethic of volunteerism and high level of civic engagement and community spirit. Some found it easy to participate in Natick town government, with lots of opportunities for residents to volunteer. Volunteers were described as dedicated to working on projects with a good skill set.

Accessibility, transparency and openness were also noted by many. A number of respondents commented that our government is generally accessible. There is generally visibility and accountability for more consequential decisions. Respondents thought the town is incredibly well-run, with high expectations and dedication, based on a commitment of all parties to doing what's right for the town. The community was thought to be generally supportive of town administration, and to appreciate public dialogue and discourse.

Town Hall was seen as radiating positive energy and a sense of custody/ownership, which generates trust and attracts volunteers and collaboration. Numerous respondents commented on the Town's professional staff, describing them as extraordinarily talented, solid, hard-working, competent, professional, bringing long-term experience, well-organized, well-paid, and well-staffed. Leaders were noted to set a good tone, to like serving the community and people, and to have a healthy working relationship with the boards/committees with whom they work. Relationships across departments and among staff were often described as collaborative and working well. In particular, the Town Administrator and School Superintendent were repeatedly reported as having a great working relationship with each other as well as professional staff.

Aspects of Town Governance with Multiple Comments for Improvement

Stakeholders interviewed or providing written feedback in response to the list of standard questions (see Page 2) offered a wide variety of comments and perspectives. In culling through those responses, we observed that many individuals commented on Town Meeting and Authorities of Town Employees, with smaller numbers of individuals commenting on Planning/Zoning and the Finance Committee. These comments have been consolidated into tables for each of these topics. Similar comments have been combined when it seemed appropriate.

How the Information Is Presented in this Report

The following sections are divided into topics. For each, there is a brief description of the topic followed by one or more tables showing the number of respondents (stratified into Employees and Volunteers) who made a particular type of comment. The information shown in the tables is reflective of common themes and does not include items that were only mentioned by 1 respondent. We have chosen to not include the single-respondent comments in this initial report in order to start narrowing the focus of this research and also to prevent any potential and impactful confirmation bias in subsequent interviews/written feedback. These items may be added at a later date as new information is learned and could become part of a final set of recommendations from the committee.

Please note that hashmarks in the tables do NOT represent Votes; they represent number of respondents offering the particular Comment. Respondents were providing their thoughts when replying to the open-ended questions listed on Page 2 of this report; specific questions were not asked.

Town Meeting

The largest number of comments to date have focused on Town Meeting. As Table 1 shows, respondents reported a variety of concerns with Town Meeting. Only concerns expressed by 2 or more respondents have been listed.

Table 1: Town Meeting Specific Problems

| Town Meeting Problems | # of Employee Respondents | # of Volunteer Respondents |
|--|----------------------------------|-----------------------------------|
| Too many nights/sessions; process is slow | //// | ### // |
| Decrease size; too many people involved | /// | ### / |
| Members may not represent their community; no regular way for community to reach out to TM members | / | //// |
| Too much minutiae | / | /// |
| TM members don't have to be well informed; not knowledgeable or qualified to understand financial statements, etc. | / | /// |
| Some members feel obligated to speak; small minority drives debate | // | / |

| Town Meeting Problems | # of Employee Respondents | # of Volunteer Respondents |
|--|---------------------------|----------------------------|
| TM model too slow, not responsive, and creates false sense of engagement | | /// |
| Lack of diversity among TM membership | /// | |
| Provide basic information/expectations; submit questions & obtain answers prior to start of TM | | /// |
| People miss many sessions with no accountability; poor attendance; no means of removal from office | / | // |
| TM most ineffective way to do zoning/planning | // | |
| SB should play a larger role in TM | // | |
| Town dept heads req to attend every TM session | // | |

Interestingly, although a number of problems were reported, many of the respondents reporting problems commented that the most recent sessions of Town Meeting were much improved. This may at least partially explain why, as shown in Table 2, the Volunteer respondents who commented on whether or not Town Meeting should be retained, favored keeping Town Meeting, whereas the opinions offered by Town Employees were more distributed. **Note that the table title “Town Meeting – Keep or Change?” was not asked as a question or suggested; all responses tallied below were volunteered by those being interviewed.**

Table 2: Town Meeting – Keep or Change?

| Opinion | # of Employee Respondents | # of Volunteer Respondents |
|-------------------------------------|---------------------------|----------------------------|
| Keep (representative) TM | ### / | ### ### /// |
| Neutral opinion/ gave pros & cons | ### | / |
| Negative but did not say to abolish | /// | /// |
| Favors Town Council | // | // |

In summary, a number of people responding like Town Meeting as Natick’s form of government, but many feel it needs improvement.

Specific Authorities of Town Employees, Including the Town Administrator

A number of stakeholders, both employees and volunteers, provided comments related to the authorities of employees. Some of these comments were specific to the authorities of the Town Administrator, whereas others were more focused on authorities of department heads. A number of comments were related to board/committee authorities versus employees.

Table 3 provides the types of authority issues suggested by stakeholders. Table 4 is more specific as it relates to the current position of Town Administrator.

Table 3: Specific Authorities of Town Employees

| Authority that Should Be Changed | From Whom To Whom? | # of Employee Respondents | # of Volunteer Respondents |
|--|---|---------------------------|----------------------------|
| Staff reporting structure not always clear | Depends on the position/department | ### / | |
| Various authorities (not specified) | SB to TA | ### / | |
| Procurement, Contracts – sign off | SB to TA &/or Department heads for some | ### | |
| Staff or Committees with overlapping authority | Depends on specific staff or committees and issue | //// | / |
| Focus SB on policy, give day-to-day (tactical) authorities to TA/staff | From SB to TA (or their designee) | /// | / |
| Align responsibility with authority | Depends on specifics | | //// |
| Reporting for Facilities Management | From dual to TA | // | |
| Paying bills | SB, not specified to whom | // | |
| Time clock | Paper should change to electronic | // | |
| School finance dept should be responsible for dept finances, not Comptroller | Comptroller to School Finance Department | // | |
| Contrast between authorities of Police Chief and Fire Chief positions (not referring to individuals) | | // | |

| Authority that Should Be Changed | From Whom To Whom? | # of Employee Respondents | # of Volunteer Respondents |
|---|----------------------------|---------------------------|----------------------------|
| Evaluate and clearly define authorities (general) | Primarily focused on SB/TA | | // |
| TA should evaluate Public Safety dept heads | SB to TA | | // |
| Authority to do licenses | SB to TA | | // |
| Water bill appeals | SB to TA | | // |
| Board members do not understand their purview | Not specific | | // |

Table 4: Authority of Town Administrator

| Opinion | # of Employee Respondents | # of Volunteer Respondents |
|---|---------------------------|----------------------------|
| Change Title to Town Manager (assumes more authority) | ### // | // |
| Give more authority, title change not mentioned | ### / | // |
| Pros & cons – TA to TM | | /// |

Planning/Zoning

Comments were received on a variety of aspects related to planning/zoning in Natick. Comments made by more than one respondent have been consolidated in Table 5.

Table 5: Planning/Zoning

| Issue/Suggestion | # of Employee Respondents | # of Volunteer Respondents |
|---|---------------------------|----------------------------|
| Reconsider FinCom role on zoning articles; have zoning committee review zoning articles instead of FinCom | // | /// |
| TM zoning articles, mostly Citizens' Petitions, not thought through; PB sends articles to TM that are not ready; zoning TM articles need to be vetted, perfected, explainable | // | // |
| Reform/revise zoning by-law; too nitpicky, confusing; codify zoning by-law. Change Zoning by-law to handle | /// | / |

| Issue/Suggestion | # of Employee Respondents | # of Volunteer Respondents |
|---|---------------------------|----------------------------|
| items like signs/lights administratively. | | |

Finance Committee

Employee and volunteer respondents both provided feedback about the Finance Committee, and these comments are summarized in Table 6. Note that there are some commonalities among comments about Town Meeting (Table 1), Planning/Zoning (Table 5), and Finance Committee (Table 6).

Table 6: Finance Committee

| Issue/Suggestion | # of Employee Respondents | # of Volunteer Respondents |
|---|---------------------------|----------------------------|
| Consider reducing # of FinCom members | // | ### // |
| FinCom review of zoning articles – is this useful? Have a separate committee? | // | // |
| Use joint appts of moderator, SB and possibly TA for FinCom members | / | // |
| Decrease # of FinCom meetings; too much prep time req of staff | // | |
| Concerns about FinCom offering a recommendation on every article; FinCom is a misnomer. | | // |
| Create separate capital/infrastructure committee | / | / |

General

A variety of comments on other topics were made by the respondents. At this point, the only one we have identified as being mentioned by multiple respondents relates to the need/desire for better communication between boards/committees.

Next Steps

The TGSC plans to approach next steps from several perspectives in parallel.

Collection of Information from the Natick Public

Collection of information around issues in Natick's form of government will continue. A few additional key stakeholders may respond to our prior request for feedback and those responses will be reviewed and combined with the information in this version of this document.

The committee is in the process of developing a survey for current and former Town Meeting members. Our goal is to obtain their feedback on not only Town Meeting, but also other aspects of our current form of government and the governance of our community. Our plan is to distribute this survey in the fall, probably September.

The same or a similar survey is expected to be offered to members of the Natick public. The details of this survey's content are currently under discussion, and methods of distributing it broadly to the public are being considered.

The committee has also included in the July property tax bills a notice of opportunity to provide input to our work. To date, 36 people have offered to provide feedback. We expect to begin reaching out to those respondents this fall, either using the above-mentioned public survey or through phone calls or emails.

We recognize that the tax bills are only received by Natick property owners, and it is important to more broadly advertise the opportunity to provide feedback. We anticipate offering at least one public forum at which members of the public may offer their comments. This is expected to take place after we have had the opportunity to evaluate the findings from at least the Town Meeting member survey.

Identifying Possible Changes to Address Problems

Now that we have identified an initial set of problems, in parallel with additional information collection the committee intends to begin identifying changes that could potentially minimize or correct these problems. This will involve delving more deeply into the areas that received the most common feedback to understand their causes (e.g., Town Meeting, authorities of the Town Administrator and other department heads, etc.), and to study the experience and forms of government in other communities that might be applicable to Natick. This is expected to include additional interviews and/or requests for written information, both with stakeholders in Natick as well as people and organizations outside of Natick who have experience with the specific topics. The committee plans to request the use of a consultant for this aspect of the work, and will return to the Select Board for approval as soon as an appropriate consultant has been identified. We feel that an experienced consultant can provide perspective and

knowledge of the specifics of other municipal governments. We intend to begin this process in the fall.

Providing Information about the TGSC's Work

To facilitate wider knowledge of our committee and its work, we created a web page at <https://sites.google.com/natickma.org/tgsc>, which provides basic information about the committee, including agendas and meeting minutes, and will be built out in the coming months. We also have a committee-specific email address at naticktowngovernance@gmail.com. We encourage members of the community to visit the website and/or reach out via email if you would like more information or to provide feedback.

Appendix I. Individuals Holding the Following Positions Were Offered the Opportunity to Provide Information to the TGSC (listed in alphabetical order)

Affordable Housing Trust Fund Board Chair
Assistant Superintendent of Schools for Finance
Bacon Free Library Director
Bacon Free Library Board of Trustees Chair
Board of Health Chair, current and former
Collector/Treasurer
Conservation Commission Chair
Council on Aging Board Chair
Deputy Town Administrator, Finance
Deputy Town Administrator, Operations
Director of Assessing
Director of Community and Economic Development, current and former
Director of Facilities
Director of Public Health
Director of Public Works
Director of Senior Center and Community Services
Finance Committee Chair, current and former
Fire Chief
Historic District Commission Chair
Historical Commission Chair
Morse Institute Library Board of Trustees Chair
Morse Institute Library Director
Open Space Advisory Committee Chair
Planning Board Chair and recommended members
Police Chief
Recreation & Parks Commission Chair
Recreation & Parks Director
School Committee Chair, current and former
Select Board members, current and former
Superintendent of Schools
Town Administrator, current and former
Town Clerk
Town Comptroller
Town Counsel, current and former
Town Moderator