

Blue Ribbon Committee Meeting Minutes

October 1, 2024

1. Roll Call

The meeting began at 6:30. Present were Linda Scott, Jack Bartley, Marcy Murningham, Susan Falkoff, Jimmy Mello, and Sarah Baker. Christine Cole had informed the Committee prior to the meeting that she would not be able to attend. Also present as staff for the Committee was Municipal Policy Analyst Doug Newton.

2. Examination of Minutes

The minutes were approved with the following edits:

7/10 meeting:

- Identify minutes by committee, type of document, and date.
- No beginning time noted
- Typo of "soth" to "south" under roll call
- Note under discussion that Council President Sideris and Councilor Piccirilli confirmed that work can vary depending on councilors and issues to be dealt with.
- Add under paragraph two that Linda Scott suggested that more meetings can be added as we see what time is necessary.

8/20 meeting:

- Same formatting as noted above
- Remove apostrophe for "benefits"
- Missed Bruce Coltin in list of attendees
- No beginning time for meeting
- Note under discussion that Jack Bartley suggested not referring to a salary "increase" but a salary "adjustment." Also add that Susan Falkoff suggested that possibly with an increase in salary should come an increase in expectations.
- Under public comment, add that Elodia Thomas added that she has reviewed council salaries under the following categories: councilor payment, form of government, population, budget, amount of councilor support, size in square miles, benefits. She also asked if the Councilors receive stipends for some of their work.

9/11 meeting

- Add beginning time
- Note that Marcy Murningham dissented as to the removal of Question 5. She asserted that public discussion of the types of knowledge and competence necessary for high City Councilor performance, including a willingness to learn, helps increase and improve relevant voter information so voters can make better decisions.

3. City Councilor Interviews

Municipal Policy Analyst Doug Newton began by reading the questions that the Committee agreed to ask each Councilor:

1. How many hours per week or month would you estimate that you spend as a city councilor?

This is a list of potential activities that you would be responsible for as a Watertown City Councilor in an average month. If we've missed any activities, please add them below in the "other" spaces:

City Council Meetings

City Council Committee Meetings

Other meetings (with city staff, boards and commissions; community activities and outreach, etc.)

Constituent services (telephone calls, e-mails, etc.)

Research on City Topics

Paperwork (minutes, reports, etc.)

2. We have been looking at what other communities with similar forms of government pay their elected officials. What variables make a community relevant for comparison? For example, a residential vs. commercial tax base, population size, and budget size?
3. How have you seen the roles and responsibilities of a Councilor change during your tenure?
4. Is there anything else you would like to say or wish we had asked?

Council President Sideris was the first Councilor to be interviewed. He began by speaking about his role as Council President. He listed out several duties including supervising the four employees of the City Council: the auditor, the manager, the council clerk and the council analyst. He added that as president he takes regular meetings with city staff including the manager. Further, the Council President also serves on the School Committee which adds numerous other duties. He said that it is difficult to estimate how many hours he spends per week because some in the summer can be as low as 6-8 but other weeks it can take up so much time that he cannot do anything in his day to day job, up to 30-40 hours. He noted that he takes pride in providing constituent services and keeping aware of challenges his constituents are facing such as the condition of roads. He added that while he is not on any subcommittees he does attend some of the meetings, particularly those of the Budget & Fiscal Oversight Committee. He currently meets weekly with the team constructing the new Watertown High School. He noted that the role has evolved a great deal since he began, as initially there was little other responsibility beyond attending meetings of the Council. The city's budget has increased from \$53M when he first started on the Council to over \$200M today.

Marcy Murningham asked President Sideris of the most complicated issue he has confronted as Council President and he noted the ongoing issue of Watertown Square. He also mentioned collective bargaining challenges that have occurred over the years. He noted that the most difficult issue he has ever handled was when the Council denied an arbitration award that the firefighters union had been granted which led to large scale protests by the union. Linda Scott asked if there is anything he could think of to make the job of a Councilor easier to which he answered that there is not. Susan Falkoff asked if the role of the Council President could perhaps be spread out more widely. He replied that some have suggested having another Councilor sit on the School Committee but that the School Committee very much appreciates having the Council President there. Sarah Baker asked how he would weigh the time he spends in roles unique to being the Council President against roles on subcommittees

that he does not have. He noted that there are some Committees who take on significant amounts of work and others where it is less. He clarified that he thinks the Committee should not consider a salary that would enable Councilors to quit their jobs and to not consider the current slate of Councilors in their deliberations. Jimmy Mello asked how much time he and other Councilors spend working with other elected and appointed officials, to which he replied that not a lot of time is spent on that, though he did give some examples.

Councilor Caroline Bays then began speaking. She said that the amount of hours spent will be varied between Councilors and over time. She noted that another responsibility Councilors take on is sending out newsletters, which also varies between Councilors. She noted that as chair of the Personnel and City Organization Committee she is quite busy and has had that Committee since beginning on the Council. She gave an example of the recent Charter Review which was a great deal of work but was a relatively unique and rare event. She noted that Councilors in a form of government such as Watertown take on more responsibility than Councilors in a city with a mayor. This is primarily due to Councilors in Watertown being the manager's boss. She noted that Councilors are on call all the time and that she takes calls on vacation, at night, and during other life activities. She suggested that the Blue Ribbon Committee could consider how their recommendation could lead to a more diverse council overall, including people with odd work schedules or those with children.

Jimmy Mello asked Councilor Bays how the Council could be made more diverse when they are elected. She explained that there may be ways to make it more appealing for people from certain groups to take on the job. Sarah Baker asked if Councilor Bays has anything to add to the responsibilities of the Councilors in a manager form of government as opposed to a mayor. She opined that the responsibilities are not offset and it is definitely more work with a manager than with a mayor. Linda Scott asked about the benefits received by City Councilors and what might change if more residents knew about them. Councilor Bays suggested that it may be beneficial for more residents to be aware of that. Marcy Murningham asked if any perks or additional benefits could be offered to help Councilors. She responded that most of the benefits she listed out are not currently offered and suggested that we have a good Council as is despite the relatively low salary.

Councilor Lisa Feltner then spoke. She explained that she has done research in the past tallying the hours spent by City Councilors which came to somewhere between 22-26 hours per month on average. She emphasized that the City has changed a great deal since she came on the Council with several large development projects which have involved a lot of time. She also noted that her district is very diverse and covers some of the wealthiest parts of Watertown as well as subsidized housing. She noted that changes in staff such as the Council Clerk can complicate the job, and that the job has not slowed down in her years on the Council since 2016. She noted that she has worked on numerous holidays over the years. She added that zoom has made the job both harder and easier.

Marcy Murningham asked Councilor Feltner how she learns from interacting frequently with other elected and appointed officials. Councilor Feltner answered that it can be helpful to speak to other Councilors when starting on the Council particularly about issues such as the Open Meeting Law.

Councilor Tony Palomba then spoke. He said it can be difficult to estimate how long a City Council meeting will be. He added that Committee meetings typically go from 1-2 hours. He further added that the total volume of meetings a Councilor could conceivably attend is quite large, especially when considering boards and commissions. Which meetings a Councilor attends in part depends on his or her

interests. He said that it is very difficult to put a number on hours worked as a Councilor. He explained that At-large Councilors do provide constituent services and that he personally does quite a lot even when he is not sure if he will be able to help the constituent. He suggested looking at population data as well as the structure of government and staff in terms of comparison to other Committees. He cited Cambridge as an example where Councilors have much more staff than most others. He suggested that the size of budget may not be the most important factor. He explained that additions in staff have been helpful to the Council. He noted zoning and assessing as two policy areas which are quite dense and at times difficult for Councilors to understand.

Councilor Piccirilli then spoke. He said that he came up with about 30 hours per week on average for the amount of time he spends as a Councilor. He said that he still answers emails and phone calls even on vacation. He said that the job has changed dramatically since he joined the Council, saying that Councilors took a more passive role back in 2005-2007. All Councilors today are community activists who were deeply involved in the community prior to running for office. He explained that today most agenda items come from suggestions from the Council whereas in the past virtually all of items came from the manager. He said that Watertown has come to accomplish so much more than neighboring communities that meeting with other communities is less useful today. He did suggest that the Council should have a second council clerk whose sole responsibility is to support committees. He said that most Councilors struggle with Committee reports and that they are a great deal of work which can take several hours. Committee meetings themselves also take several hours for preparation. He reminded the Committee to keep in mind Proposition 2/12. Sarah Baker asked Councilor Piccirilli to explain why Proposition 2/12 is significant to the work of the Committee given the small size of the Council's budget. He elaborated that the limits it places on a budget without new growth impact everything a municipality does.

4. Public Comment

Linda Scott made a motion that public comment be taken out of order, which was agreed to unanimously. Tom Tracy spoke to the Committee. Mr. Tracy noted that he served as auditor for Watertown for 29 years and as interim manager in between Michael Driscoll and George Proakis. He said that Councilors spend numerous hours involved in the community and agreed with Councilors that years ago the role of Councilor involved much less time than it does today. He opined that Councilors deserve a raise. He explained that benefits are generally covered under state law and cannot be changed by the Committee. He suggested that the Committee try to build in automatic adjustments based on some metric such as consumer price index to avoid the need for another Blue Ribbon Committee in the future.

5. New Business

No Committee member raised any new business.

6. Scheduling of Future Meetings

Doug Newton noted that some Committee members had expressed to him an interest in having another meeting in October and perhaps two in November. He offered to send out a doodle poll including such dates if it is the will of the Committee. Sarah Baker expressed that more meetings could make the

process go longer and that she does not anticipate deep disagreement among the Committee. She added that it would be difficult for her to make multiple meetings per month work. Marcy Murningham expressed that she would like the Committee to come up with a work plan for its progress moving forward. The Committee agreed to follow its normal procedure involving a doodle poll. Linda Scott and Marcy Murningham expressed concern that the Committee is on a tight timeline and will need a plan to complete its work.

7. Adjournment

The meeting adjourned at 9:02 PM.