

Summary Highlights of the Holliston Governance Committee Report to the Select Board

INTRODUCTION

On November 21, 2022, the Holliston Select Board approved a motion for the Governance Committee to detail the Committee's findings and provide a report to the Select Board.

The original charge of the Governance Committee is to assist in the development of town-wide policies, act as a liaison between all departments, boards, committees, and commissions as it relates to governance, and help with the development of a strategic plan.

The Select Board established the Governance Committee because the last comprehensive review of the Holliston General By-Laws occurred over thirty-five years ago and the last Government Study Committee report was issued in 1994, 28 years ago. During this time, municipal government has become more complex and demanding which has resulted in more towns upgrading their governance structure and full-time professional capacity to meet the challenges of today and the future.

The Governance Committee has prepared a 13-page report with its recommendations for a strategic plan to address necessary governance improvements. What follows is a synopsis of the primary sections of the report.

Committee Membership

Since the Governance Committee's first meeting on July 16, 2020, there have been changes in its membership. The current Governance Committee consists of four members. Sam Tyler, Chair and Len Engel are the remaining original members. Hayley Fetrow and Suzanne Nersessian were appointed in 2022.

STATEMENT OF FINDINGS

Based on the research undertaken by the Governance Committee regarding Holliston's governing structure, we have identified the following findings.

- The Town of Holliston has not kept pace with other Massachusetts towns which have taken steps to continually update their management capacity and reconfigure their governance structure to more effectively address the greater complexities of municipal government that have evolved over time.
- The last comprehensive assessment of governance in Holliston occurred in 1994, 28 years ago and few governance changes have occurred since then. Consequently, Holliston has no Charter, no budget development By-Law, an outdated Town Administrator special act and no periodic review of its General By-Laws.
- Past studies from state agencies and town committees have recommended changes in Holliston's government structure, but most suggestions have not been implemented and none have been implemented since 1994. That trend continues today.
- Since 1994, municipal government has become more complex and demanding for Holliston and the Town Administrator. Federal and state regulations and enforcement changes have

been enacted, adding more responsibilities for town government and creating more administrative burdens.

- Holliston's government structure is decentralized with eleven independently elected boards and offices. This point was raised in both the 1988 and 2021 Financial Review Reports of Holliston by the state Division of Local Services and was cited in the 2021 report as one of the reasons for recommending the creation of a Charter.
- Town Government is dependent on a mix of part-time volunteer or elected residents and full-time professional staff. There are 33 committees that have been established to perform public service duties.
- Lack of transparency and clarity in many of Holliston's By-Laws exist due to limited descriptions of responsibilities for many key positions, boards or committees. This dearth of information makes it difficult for residents to understand the roles of town officials.
- We do acknowledge the positive steps taken by the Town Administrator in the creation of the Deputy Town Administrator position for HR and elevating the Treasurer-Collector position to Finance Director. Also, the Facilities Director position was established in 2020 and the Public Works Department was established in 2014.

ORGANIZATIONAL STRATEGIC PLAN

One of the charges to the Governance Committee in 2020 was to create an organizational strategic plan. Since July 2020, the Governance Committee has scheduled 72 meetings for committee business, not including meetings of one or two members with other Holliston town officials or public hearings. With that background, we have developed a short-term plan and a longer-term plan of six initiatives that could constitute a strategic plan for steps the Governance Committee recommends and believes are important for the future of Holliston in successfully meeting the current and future challenges facing the Town.

Longer-Term Projects

Holliston Charter

The Select Board should initiate a process to establish a Town Charter for Holliston. The Governance Committee is convinced that Holliston is missing an important governing opportunity by not having established a Charter of the Town. Many other Massachusetts towns with a wide range of populations have adopted Charters. Creating a Charter was the #1 recommendation of the state Division of Local Services (DLS) in its Financial Management Review of Holliston report in November 2021.

Town Administrator

It is past time to upgrade the provisions of the 1994 Special Act that established the position of Town Administrator in Holliston. In 1994 when the Act was adopted, the authority provided was less than the norm for the Town Administrators in neighboring and peer towns. In the past 28 years, little change has occurred with the legal authority of the Holliston Town Administrator.

Budget Development Process

The Governance Committee and the state Division of Local Services in its 2021 Financial Management Review of Holliston have recommended the creation of a written budget By-Law document. The lack of a written budget development process has led to uncertainty of the proper role of the various players in the budget process. A system based on custom and past practice rather than a written structure inevitably will create uncertainty and unnecessary tension among the parties involved with the budget process.

Holliston Government Structure

Two separate Holliston government studies raised the issue of the decentralization of town policy and supervision of town operations, excluding schools, among elected boards and offices. Eleven (11) different elected boards and offices which are each independent of the other and the establishment of 33 committees with public duties were felt to create a dispersion of general government management that could impede public accountability.

Short-Term Projects

By-Law Study Committee

The Governance Committee has prepared a revised By-Law Study Committee article taking into consideration the comments raised at the October 17, 2022 Annual Town Meeting. This article should be submitted for the warrant of the May 15, 2023 Annual Town Meeting.

Select Board Size

The Governance Committee will be prepared to make a recommendation at the May 15, 2023 Annual Town Meeting regarding an anticipated Citizen's Petition to increase the Select Board size from three to five members. Coming to a decision on this matter will require agreement on a realignment of duties between the Select Board and the Town Administrator.

Alignment of Duties - For both the Select Board size and Town Administrator initiatives, establishing a more functional alignment of duties between the Select Board and Town Administrator is a critical factor for the successful implementation of both projects.

CONCLUSION

Clearly, there is much work still needed to be undertaken and this report of the Governance Committee has identified six governance projects that the Select Board and Town Administrator should focus on over the next few years. Of the six projects, the highest priorities should be creating the Charter for Holliston and upgrading the Town Administrator Special Act. There should be no hesitancy in moving forward to act on these recommendations. With 2½ years of experience with town governance, the Governance Committee should continue with this work.

GC Members: Sam Tyler, Chair, Len Engel, Hayley Fetrow and Sue Nersessian

The full 13-page report of the Governance Committee with links to additional files can be found in the Governance Committee's Holliston web page.

February 23, 2023