

**Report from the  
Town Governance Committee**

**Strafford, Vermont  
July, 2017**

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## Executive Summary

The Town Governance Committee was appointed by the Selectboard in September, 2016. Our central task was to take a forward-oriented look at how town government can best be set up and conducted to serve the residents of Strafford.

Our activities were: contacting the Vermont League of Cities and Towns to better understand the structural options available to us under Vermont law; interviewing twenty-five current and former Town officials and employees; conducting a survey of Strafford residents (149 responses); holding a public meeting in February, 2018; and meeting monthly as a committee to analyze and organize what we were learning. (Summaries of the interviews and the survey are included as Appendix A.)

### Key findings:

- there are limited structural options available to towns of our size and no compelling argument to change our current structure;
- the original question that led to the appointment of this committee – whether there should be three or five Selectboard members – was not a high-priority question for most people. We heard, “It’s not the number; it’s the people;”
- most residents of Strafford feel town government is functioning reasonably well, given limited resources and increased requirements from the State;
- there was a large gap between what townspeople thought they knew about town government (a lot) and what town officials thought they knew (not enough);
- there could be better communication and where appropriate coordination between various town boards and committees;
- in a town like Strafford, volunteerism plays an oversized role.

### Our recommendations:

1. An easy-to-read compilation of information that will help educate townspeople on selected topics (e.g. job descriptions; budgets; roads; conflicts of interest) and clear up common misunderstandings about town government;
2. A new form that will clarify the charges and expectations associated with various town bodies, including the inter-relationships between them, for the benefit of both current and prospective members of these groups;
3. A new system for coordinating volunteer efforts in town that will elevate the already high level of appreciation for these efforts and make it easier for people to participate when their specific expertise is needed.

## **I. Compilation of Helpful Information**

At our public meeting, there was a suggestion from the floor that the Town should organize and publish a document titled, "What Everyone Should Know About How the Town Works." We know that much of this vital, basic information exists now, but it is told in different voices, on multiple platforms, and at different levels of detail. We think it would be very helpful to the residents of Strafford to have a small group of good writers compile this "primer for residents." We are including here our contribution to that effort in several areas that came up during our study.

### **A. Common Misunderstandings**

In the course of surveying the Town we discovered some misconceptions and misunderstandings. This is a summary and explanation of some of the more commonly misunderstood issues we encountered.

The Town Office and Town Clerk are at the center of our town business and activity. The Town Clerk is often mistaken for a person who takes every complaint and can solve any problem.

From *HANDBOOK FOR VERMONT MUNICIPAL CLERKS*:

"In many Vermont municipalities the municipal clerk is the most visible elected official and as such is expected to be informed about all aspects of town business from animals to zoning. Briefly, the municipal clerk is required by law to be the receiver and recorder of the town's archives. Proceedings of the annual and special town meetings are recorded and filed by the municipal clerk....."

While many of the municipal clerk's duties and responsibilities are clearly defined in state statutes, others are a result of custom, such as receiving telephone inquiries dealing with anything from the next Selectboard meeting to landfill hours. While a municipal clerk is not legally required to perform such extra duties, it is a good idea to be courteous and helpful. A municipal clerk will probably hear many complaints and should make an effort to listen sympathetically. For example, if a citizen has a complaint about the grading of a gravel road, the clerk could notify the road commission or pass the information on to the Selectboard."

In Strafford, one person holds three positions: Town Clerk, Treasurer, and Assistant to the Selectboard. While our Town Clerk wears many hats, she is not responsible for every aspect of Town government. No one person could or would be asked to keep track of the work of all the employees, elected officials, and committees. It is perhaps best to consider the Town Office the place to call to find the best person to help you with your problem or question. The Town Office employees may not be able to help you solve your problem, but they can probably direct you to the person or group you are looking for.

A Town Clerk is elected by the voters and does not answer to the Selectboard. By State statute, the Town Clerk must appoint an assistant Town Clerk. In our Town cooperation

between the Selectboard, the Town Clerk, the Road Commissioner, Town committees, and other entities is a normal part of business. Things works quite well in Strafford. We are lucky in that sense.

Currently the Assistant to the Selectboard serves four hours per week. When tracking hours it appears that more hours are actually provided to assist the Selectboard. This tracking project needs some more time to reveal actual average hours. The Selectboard and Town Clerk together may then wish to address the allocation of hours.

The Road Commissioner is overseen by the Selectboard. The position is appointed annually. The Town Clerk often takes questions and hears concerns about roads, but has no authority or responsibility in this area.

Listers are responsible for maintaining the Grand List. Often town residents complain about property assessments and tax matters to the Town Clerk. The Town Clerk is actually only responsible for distributing tax bills and receiving tax payments. Errors, grievances, etc. are matters for the Listers.

The Selectboard appoints members to Town committees. Chairs of committees report to the Selectboard. Many Town committees request support from the Town Clerk and the assistant Town Clerk. They generally provide support when requested, feeling that volunteers give a lot of themselves and deserve support. They don't necessarily have time for this, especially at busier times of the year. This can be difficult for the Town Clerk to manage. Committees are a responsibility of the Selectboard, but members of committees regularly go to the Town Clerk for help with their questions and needs.

In the survey it was clear that some respondents believed that a Town Manager could replace a Town Clerk. This is not correct. If a Town Manager is hired, a Town Clerk is still required by statute and the work of the Town Clerk remains the same. A Town Manager is an employee of the Selectboard and manages Town employees- in Strafford this would be mainly the road crew. In a larger town there may be many Town employees and departments that require a day to day manager; a Selectboard could not manage a large number of employees in a volunteer capacity. Norwich, for example, has a Town Manager for approximately 30 full and part-time employees who operate the transfer station, fire department, police department, recreation department, etc. Strafford is very fortunate that many of our town services are run and managed by volunteers.

When we spoke with officials and employees of nearby towns we learned that all town suffer some confusion in understanding responsibilities of town officials and employees. There are many areas of cross over. Cooperation and support between and amongst town entities is necessary. Strafford seems to enjoy a very high level of volunteerism and generally neighborly behavior among citizens.

## B. Roads

Which roads are maintained by the Town and which by the State?

Roads in Vermont are known as Town Highways. Detailed information is set out in Chapter 3 of Title 19 of the Vermont Statutes, as annotated. These, as well as a highway map, are available in the Town Office. Strafford has 68.3 miles of town highways, all of which are maintained by the Town.

Highways fall into three categories:

- Class 1. Town highways that form an extension of a State of Vermont highway and have a route number. These are state maintained.
- Class 2. The most important town highways with trunk lines from town to town. Strafford is one of just a few Vermont towns which have a state numbered highway running through them, but because they are Class 2 highways are not maintained by the State, i.e. Route 132.
- Class 3. Town highways not classed as 1 or 2, but maintained so that under *normal conditions* can be negotiated year-round by a standardly manufactured pleasure car. (is mud season considered to be normal conditions?)
- Class 4. Any highway or road not found under classes 1, 2, or 3. Class 4 highways are not maintained except for drainage, necessary repair and/or convenience of town residents.

Strafford's highway mileage:

- Class 1: 0
- Class 2: 15.74 miles
- Class 3: 52.57 miles
- Class 4: unspecified

State aid for town highways is based on class and mileage.

Funding for Strafford town highway maintenance in 2016 came from three sources:

1. Town taxes 59%
2. State aid 12% in quarterly payments
3. Grants 29%

Federal financial aid, when it occurs (e.g. Hurricane Irene), is allocated to towns via the state agency of transportation. The annual state transportation budget provides 6% for Class 1 highways, 44% for Class 2, and 50% for Class 3. An additional annual appropriation is made for grants to cover paving and infrastructure. These grants can be applied for and require 10 or 20 percent matching funding from the Town.

### **C. Understanding the Town Budget – Structure and Calendar**

Vermont is a Dillon's Rule state. You might reasonably ask what that means and what connection Dillon's Rule has to our budget. John Dillon was a judge in Iowa who in 1868 issued two court decisions affirming state preeminence over local government. In contrast to Home Rule, Dillon's Rule says that in the case of a question about local authority, one must assume that the local government does NOT have the power in question and that it remains with the state.

Because we are a Dillon's Rule state, there are areas of our budget, and more significantly our budget calendar, which the town does not control. Understanding these constraints helps to understand why we collect taxes when we do, why the town borrows money to cover the budget, why our budget for a given year isn't approved before we're well into that year, and so forth.

Obviously, there are areas that the town, not the state, controls. The town needs to maintain the roads, provide essential services required for a town (tax collection, auditing, police services, street lights, emergency management), and any other town services that the citizens are willing to pay for (libraries, meeting spaces, recreation areas, town forest).

As you know from reading the Town Report, there are two main funds we vote on every year, the Highway Fund (roads, road maintenance, equipment, materials, labor) and the General Fund (everything else, essentials and those services we opt to include).

We also have debt in the form of two bonds, a Highway bond and a Town Garage bond. Our payments on these are included in the budgets we vote on every year.

Occasionally, we have expenses included in our budget that we "didn't put there" and we can't remove, ignore, or vote down. These are the much-debated state mandates and are a direct result of being a Dillon's Rule state. There have been mandates in the recent past around solid waste and recycling.

An example of a state mandate that will probably be a future line item in the budget is Act 64, the Vermont Clean Water Initiative. There is a \$2,000 initial permitting cost which we will be required to pay, we will have to do an inventory of town roads and drainage issues, and then have 20 years to comply with a certain % of the requirements of Act 64. The funding and exactly what % of the requirements we'll need to comply with have not yet been finalized by the state but this will most likely become a line item in our budget in the future. Incidentally, we should remember that something our town employees do, and are not recognized for, is to get grants to offset some of these mandated expenses.

So, while being a Dillon's Rule state means we can have expenses, as a town, that we have no control over, you will see in the following month by month summary, that it also means that we have less control of our budget calendar than most of us suppose.

In addition to the specific state requirements and payments noted for each month, I want to highlight the recurring pattern of both our monthly checkbook balances and our need to draw

on a line of credit (the tax anticipation note) that tends to repeat year after year. We tend to start the year with a modest to small amount of money in the town checkbook. This balance declines, despite drawing on our line of credit, to the 5-figure range by mid-summer. We then see a spike with the September tax payments to around \$1,000,000, a dramatic drop-off from September through November as school taxes are transferred out of the town account and the bond interest and principal payments come due. Another spike comes with the December tax payments and another drop-off as we pay off remaining debt on our tax anticipation notes (\$425,000 and \$400,000 in the last two years) and more school taxes are transferred.

I have appended a very rough graph of the money in the town check book month by month over the last two years as a way of helping to visualize the pattern. This is based solely on the amount of money in the checkbook on the date the first check was written each month so only gives a vague notion of the true picture for any given month. Despite that, I believe the two years of data shows a pattern that makes sense given the constraints that the calendar puts on our budget. Any mistakes or misrepresentations are entirely mine!

### January

Our budget year, a calendar year, starts on January 1 even though we don't approve the budget until early March. Work on the Town Report is started. The Select Board begins formally working on this year's budget. Every month has payroll expenses and other recurring operating expenses, so I won't mention them again in the look at our calendar, they are just there! We do receive a gas tax payment from the state in January.

### February

In February, the budget for the current year is finalized by the Select Board and the Town Report is finished and goes to press. The Town is informed about the County taxes, usually too late to be included in the Town Report (requiring the Town Clerk and the Select Board to make a good guess). County taxes pay for judges, courts, staff, courthouse, operating expenses, sheriff, duty clerks, and jail.

### March

At Town Meeting we vote on the budget for the current year. The Select Board may vote to sign documents for a Tax Anticipation Note to cover expenses until we have sufficient income to pay our bills.

### April

We receive a gas tax payment from the State. If we haven't applied for a Tax Anticipation Note in March, we do so in April or May. Yearly property taxes, which will be mailed in July, are based on the Grand List value as of April 1<sup>st</sup> and billed to the April 1<sup>st</sup> owner of record. Homestead declarations must be filed by April 15.

## May

Interest payments on the bonds are due in May.

## June

Change of appraisal notices sent to taxpayers by the Listers by June 4 and appraisal grievance hearings.

## July

The State sets the education tax rate and property tax bills go out by end of month. State law requires at least 30 days before taxes are due once the bills have been sent out. The Grand List must be filed with State in July. There is a gas tax income payment from State in July.

## September

September 1<sup>st</sup> is the deadline for Current Use applications.  
The first half of the property tax payments is due.  
The first half of the school taxes are transferred out of the town account.

## October

The Town receives “hold harmless” payment from the State (\$130,630 in 2016). This payment is designed to hold the municipality harmless from loss in municipal revenue resulting for the assessment of property at use value. Strafford has land valued at \$25M under current use. Unfortunately, the “hold harmless” payment doesn’t begin to cover lost revenue. We receive a gas tax income payment from State in October. The Select Board sends a letter to all town organizations seeking budget funding (fire department, library, committees and boards) asking for their requests for next year.

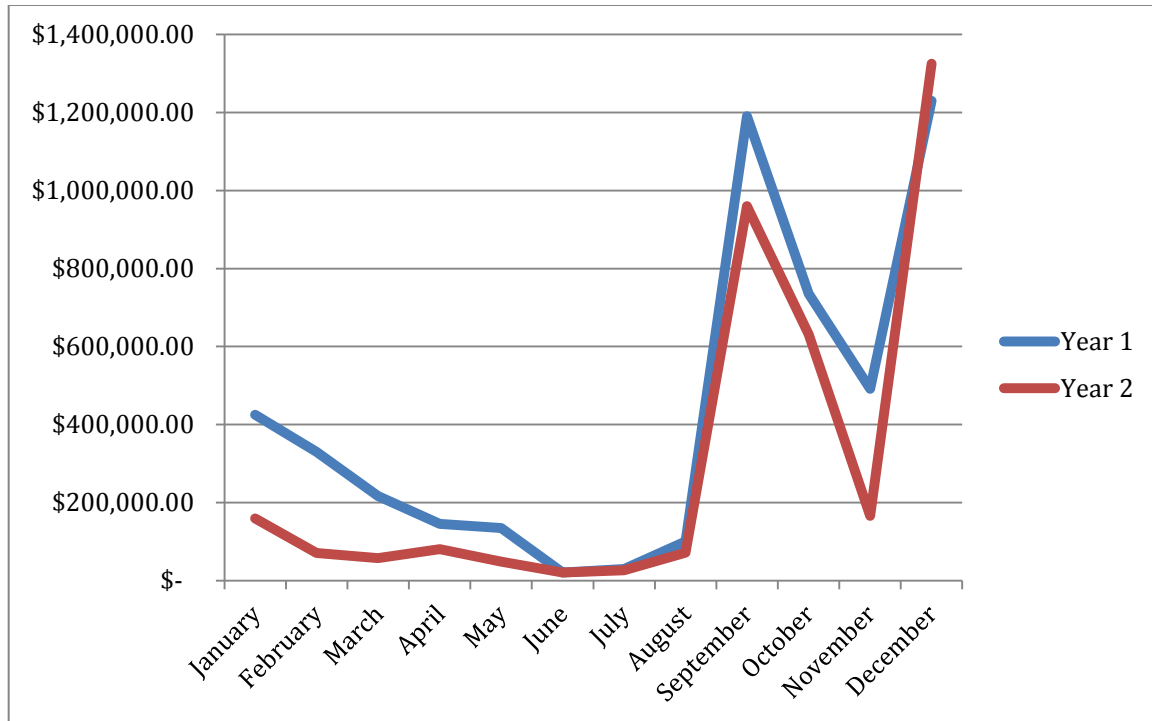
## November

Bond interest and principal payments are due on both bonds. Strafford receives “payment in lieu of taxes” (\$7872 in 2016) for state owned property in Town (Morrill Homestead, Podunk and Clover Hill WMA’s). Budget requests are due from Town organizations. The Town hears from Insurance providers re health care, Workmen’s Compensation, etc. (now or in early December).

## December

The second half of the property taxes are due. Tax anticipation notes may be paid off and the second half of the school taxes are transferred out of the town account.





Town checking account balances shown early each month over 2 years.

#### D. Conflict of Interest

In both our interviews and on the survey, concern about conflicts of interest came up. When we checked with our state representatives, we heard that was an issue that surfaced frequently in towns of all sizes, and usually in relation to people who provide valuable professional services to their Towns while also participating in town government.

The best response seems to be having a clear, well-publicized Conflict of Interest policy, which is followed consistently. The Strafford Selectboard has put such a policy in place, and it was formally adopted in March, 2017. It is available on the Town website, but the following section captures its spirit:

Article 2. Purpose. The purpose of this policy is to ensure that the business of this municipality will be conducted in such a way that no public official of the municipality will gain a personal or financial advantage from his or her work for the municipality and so that the public trust in municipal officials will be preserved. It is also the intent of this policy to insure that all decisions made by municipal officials are based on the best interest of the community.

## **II. A New Form**

Our committee was struck by how many different committees, boards, and commissions serve the town in a variety of ways. But we were also struck by the fact that there is no clear and consistent format for understanding what their duties are, or what service on these groups entails.

We are recommending a simple form for each of the bodies that enacts town business -- a mini-job description that answers the following questions:

- what is the purpose of this group, its “charge”?
- who does this group report to?
- when, where, and how often does it meet, and how long are the terms of service?
- what is the time commitment, if any, outside of meetings?
- what are the rules governing this group’s activities?

We recommend that this information be available at the Town Clerk’s office and that it be periodically reviewed by the groups, under supervision of the Selectboard, or the Selectboard’s appointee (see Section III).

We see two important results if the Town adopts this practice:

- Townspeople will have a good idea of what these positions require; and
- There will be more clarity about the interconnections and interdependency between various efforts

We have attached a Town organization chart as of winter, 2017, as Appendix B.

## **III. A New System**

Finally, we recommend that the Selectboard consider creating a new, appointed committee of two to three people whose job is to coordinate the efforts of volunteers.

Nothing was more clear from our study than the fact that a Town of Strafford’s size rises or falls on the extent and quality of its volunteerism. We are very lucky in both areas at the moment – indeed several officials from neighboring towns spoke enviously about the spirit of volunteerism in Strafford.

Yet we heard repeatedly that the tasks of small town government are becoming more and more complicated at the same time that modern life leaves fewer and fewer hours for volunteer activities. Larger towns could not function without professional management, yet in small towns, many of the same tasks and relationships must be managed by non-professionals, who learn on the job.

Believing that “systems get the results they are designed to get,” we recommend that the Town establish a system that will more consciously, consistently, and intentionally support volunteers and volunteerism. The Committee on Volunteers would:

- Oversee and update the process of providing information on what standing committees and task forces do (see Section II).
- Meet newcomers to Town and let them know about volunteer opportunities.
- Compile a list of townspeople who cannot commit to the regular meeting schedule of standing committees but who would be happy to contribute when a short-term need for help overlaps with their interests, expertise, and/or availability.
- Act as a clearing house for the Selectboard and other town bodies that need specific expertise or short-term help with projects of any sort.

## **Appendix A**

### **Summary Answers Present and Former Town Officials and Select Employees (~25 to date) 12/19/16**

Regarding structure and practices of town government:

- When you think about the structure of town government now, what works well?

There was substantial support in the answers for the Road Crew (5), the Town Office (6), the Select Board in general (5), the 5-member Select Board, and dedicated citizen volunteers. 4 of the respondents felt that everything was working well, while 1 interviewee felt that nothing worked.

- What doesn't work well?

There are no job descriptions available for the various town employees and officers and there is not nearly enough communication about what they do (this is the main take-away). The Select Board does not work well (4), they do not follow the law regarding Open Meetings, there is little institutional memory, town committees are not supported by the Select Board. The Town Clerk does not always present a friendly face to citizens, the Town Office should be open on Saturdays. There were several responses indicating that the Select Board needed an Administrative Assistant or Town Administrator (and 1 call for a Town Manager). A few people felt that the 5 member Select Board was the main problem. A need for more citizen participation in town government was also a thread in some of the interviews.

- From your perspective, do elected officials and town employees get what they need from each other?

Yes (4), no (2), sometimes -> usually (7), don't know (5). Other topics noted were micro-management of employees by Select Board, a couple of mentions of improvement in employee/official relations in the last year or so, the need for clearer job descriptions and expectations of behavior, and observing the proper "chain of command" by both elected officials and town employees.

What are the obstacles that keep people in town government, either elected officials or employees, from doing their jobs well?

Five of the respondents highlighted a lack of communication/information (for employees, officials, and citizens) as one of the main obstacles. Other big issues were the demands that unfunded mandates place on employees and officials (5) and too much to do and not enough time to do it (4).

The single biggest category of obstacles included too much drama, politics, and personality issues commingled with town business with 9 respondents bringing this forward in a variety of different ways.

- In your opinion, how has the task of town governance changed over the years? (Are there, for example, different expectations placed on Select Board members, or on Town employees? Different job requirements?)

The two issues that jumped out from the interviews were the demands of unfunded state mandates and the general increase in complexity/time required to run local government. These each had 7-8 mentions. Other issues were the increase in the town's budget, the Open Meeting Law and its' requirements, technology, and increased expectations from citizens.

- If you could recommend one change to the structure of town government, what would it be?

"No change" or "no idea" got 4 mentions. Four of those interviewed called for a return to a 3 member Select Board. Hiring a Town Manager got several (3) mentions though it isn't clear that people understand the differences between a Town Manager and a general-purpose assistant for the Select Board (one other person called specifically for an administrative assistant for the Select Board). Three of the people interviewed suggested that the Town and School Meetings should be alternated in the morning every other year to even out the attention paid to both budgets. The need for a Capital Budget, better employee job descriptions and a pay schedule for employees that didn't need to be publicly debated every year also got mention.

For our committee:

- Based on your experience with town government, what should this committee know that we might not already know?

It is no fun being a town official as most citizens don't understand the work and have unrealistic expectations of what you can and should do for them.

A lot of what the Select Board does is not what it wants to do but what the state says it must do. Select Board members are frequently stuck without the time to do things for the townspeople because of the required state demands.

The constant and never-ending need for volunteers to make the town run smoothly and the fact that a good part of the work of the Select Board is enabling that volunteerism. Most people don't understand the Town budget and we need a way to educate them and make it more understandable.

Health insurance for town employees is a real problem for them plus they have NO disability insurance through the town.

The Select Board is working really well these days, relationships are good and a 5 member Select Board is much better than a 3 member Select Board.

While it will likely come as no surprise, I was surprised to see "group think" is as much part of a five-member board as much as it is part of a three-member board. I had thought that a larger Board would not only spread the work to all members, but that additional people at the table would offer additional insights. Instead, the work of the Board appears to still be shared by only three members and there seems to be little variation to the voices on the Board.

Historical perspective on how the town has been governed – your committee does not have a good handle on this

The Vermont League of Cities and Towns can enrich this discussion

Proceed with caution; town has worked well for a long time, so be cautious about change.

• How can you see this committee making the biggest positive difference through our work?

At least 10 of the people interviewed cited education and communication about how the town works as the most positive outcome for our group's work. A sense of transparency and getting citizens to realize the importance of their involvement in the town's business was mentioned more than once and seems closely related to the educational concerns.

The importance of looking ahead to tomorrow's issues to help us in the future and the suggestion that we should interview our representatives as a first step.

## Summary of Responses from the Governance Survey

(142 online responses and six paper copies)

**Question One:** Please rate your own level of understanding of how town government in Strafford works:

Very Good	23%
Good	49%
Fair	24%
Poor	4%

**If there is an aspect of town governance you wish you understood better, what is it?**

### Who Does What?

I suppose I wish I understood the whole thing better. The Select Board makes most of the decisions with bigger issues going on the ballot for Town Meeting??

Division of responsibilities between clerk, board and other employees.

Who is in charge of the town clerk? How are town employees assessed for performance? Who does this assessment?

Who awards contracts and the process, how nominations for select board and commissions are made, budget allocations and salary scales

I also wish the general public understood better what the less well known offices (appointed and elected) did. Health Officer comes to mind. Also how organizations like Fire & Rescue intersect with town government.

What does a justice of the peace do most? The duties seem quite broad.

Who does what and what services they provide

What decisions the Town Clerk can make on their own

How we plan ahead and weigh options for the future.

Appointed committees ----- (for example, the Planning Commission) ---- if it is not functioning well (or completing work in a timely fashion)..... can the

Selectboard replace members before their term is up?

Reporting structure: town employees.

### **How do Budgets work?**

How is the budget monitored? Is there a monthly expenses v. budget report presented to the select board? When there are significant overages, how are decisions about further spending made? Who is involved?

Funding requirements, budgeting

Budgeting and education funding.

I wish I understood how much of our annual budget is driven by things over which we have no control, i.e.. state and federal mandates.

Allocating the budget – how are decisions reached?

How pay is set for employees

### **What is the actual Relationship with State of Vermont?**

How much is mandated by the State vs chosen by the Town

What would be the consequences if the Town did not follow the mandates from the State? Exactly what specific duties are required of the various boards and are they being met?

How (the Town) interacts with state and federal regulations

The overall structure locally and how that intersects with the State government.

I'm not clear (read am clueless) on the amount of oversight by the state of Vermont, how our select board members learn what's legal and required.

### **How do we handle Conflict of Interest?**

Whether conflict of interest is discouraged.

How are conflicts of interest on the Selectboard handled by the town? What recourse do residents have when the Selectboard makes decisions that do not comply with the law or good governance?



How potential conflicts of interest are resolved by Selectboard members. I would like to see a stronger commitment to faithfully executing the law, even when it proves inconvenient for Board members or their friends.

**Other Areas, Questions, and Comments:**

What's the mission of the town government and where is that posted? Is there such a thing? There should be.

Zoning and enforcement

How to get something on town meeting agenda? Potential for a town ordinance to clean up junk yards?

Over time the information about Board meetings has been improved. However the listserv is a poor path to reach the residents. The listserv is a good idea that has gone over the cliff because of its use for advertisements.

How the disagreements between selectmen are resolved.

The reports we have already show what the town problem are living beyond it purse strings. A majority of our paved roads are in disrepair which will be a hazard with icing and snow this winter.

Are you looking at the two previous studies that were done and ignored?

Appointments to town commissions and committees, transparency in development review board and zoning actions, election of select board and town moderator, regulation of town blights and yardtrash, protection of floodplains, official commitment of town itself (not church, Lions, etc) to social and economic wellbeing of its citizens. (I have a "Not One" pledge for our town. It begins, "Not One without adequate and healthy food" and continues from there.)

**Question Two: Please rate your own level of satisfaction with how town government in Strafford functions:**

<b>Very Satisfied</b>	<b>16%</b>
<b>Satisfied</b>	<b>61%</b>
<b>Not Satisfied</b>	<b>18%</b>
<b>No opinion</b>	<b>5%</b>

**If there is a single change you would like to see in the structure and/or process of government in the Town of Strafford, what would it be?**

**Better Communication:**

Continue to increase transparency- less gossip and inside information at public meetings

Online systems for fuller transparency.

It is great to have the Selectboard minutes posted on the list serve for all to read, but they should be well-written. Maybe the town needs to hire someone who knows how to take notes and write good minutes.

The "strafford list-serv" is so full of advertisements, it is not worth looking at and is a poor way to communicate official Town news. I personally would rather avoid all of the noise and subscribe to an official mail service from the Town of Strafford. Emma or Mailchimp might be used or the Town Clerk could maintain the list.

More communication/explanation about budget matters

Consistently proper, literate minutes

**Culture and Participation**

Very talented and dedicated citizens contribute time and talent to different committees and groups. It disturbs me that they are often criticized for their efforts. I feel it makes volunteering unattractive.

Would be nice to have a larger room so that more residents can participate. The meeting room is too small when there are major issues on the table and more people would like to attend.

More citizen attendance at meetings would be nice (not really structure or process) and I wonder if more space at meetings would encourage that. But of course that has to also accommodate having the meetings at a regular place and usually not having a lot of extras anyway.

More normal process for selecting Select Board, i.e. candidates must be identified weeks ahead of time, public forum must be held with them, they must be required to issue a public statement/brochure stating why they want to

be on the board and what their positions are, and they must reply to a short questionnaire prepared by a new Town Meeting Committee charged with efforts to ensure success of the annual Town Meeting.

I appreciate the spirit of those who engage in committees etc but find it to be a small clique. Not very welcoming to people who move here and populated by the same people perennially. The roads are good. The town offices seem efficient. The select board seems to function well enough. But the end result is a disengaged citizenry. The fact that Coutermarsh's junk yard on Miller Pond Rd continues to exist is evidence enough of the failure of town government to address and resolve a longstanding problem. I think if you examine the question honestly and with open minds about the potential for change you will find other evidence of a government that simply ignores that which it finds unpleasant to address.

**At Town Office:**

Fewer staff in the town office. I don't think we need 3 employees to run the small town office, in addition to a 5 member selectboard.

A more efficient Town Clerk who needs fewer assistants to perform her duties.

I feel that the Town Clerk's office plays an outsized role in the workings of the town. In many ways it seems as though her office has started serving as a town manager, and is less limited to the roles of the town clerk.

Town clerks office needs better hours.

Training of town employees to be helpful.

I feel as though the town clerks, with all due respect, need to remember they work for the townspeople. Sometimes their hours, for instance, seem like a great mystery, for instance. How come it's not more openly publicized, particularly around elections, town meeting day, tax due dates, or just because. I don't always read the town website (it's not particularly user friendly). And frankly, with the amount I pay in taxes, I'd like to see them open on a Saturday and 2 or 3 evening hours. Aren't they working for me? ...

**Consistently High Ethical Standards:**

Board members considering the town's interest above any personal interest or

bias and being careful not to pay undue attention to squeaky, loud wheels just because they are loud and threatening.

I believe the town is so small and the people willing to serve so limited that conflicts of interest, or the appearance of conflicts of interest, seem inevitable; nonetheless, I think we can do better to allay the worries some of us have.

... The town government should also be wary of conflict of interest. We have seen some odd permits and approval for construction projects that skirt existing regulations. Such practices do not foster confidence in our local officials.

Selectboard members should understand the legal and ethical framework they operate in, and should never be allowed to make decisions that benefit them personally.

In the past there has been a perception that decision making is not transparent and that certain people are favored. I think that has gotten better but it still needs to be at the forefront of our minds and actions.

That elected officials take seriously, and act on this fairly, that all in this town should be treated equally. That they, as elected officials, should act honestly and above board - obey all rules and laws - and listen and react fairly to all.

### **Town Meetings:**

The only thing I'd like to see changed is to have the town meeting and school meetings split up between two nights with ballot voting the normal Tuesday. Having to sit in those chairs in the Town House for hours on end on Tuesday is a killer for many people (me included) and keeps many people away (not to mention those who feel they can't take time away from work to attend).

Town meeting held one day, with voting done either that night or the night after by ballot - like regular election voting. It is more convenient and allows participation for those with work schedules who can't take a day off. It is the only thing about Norwich that I'd like Strafford to emulate.

Alternate times for school and town annual meetings each year.

Would like to see proxy voting in Town Meeting.

## **Changes in/Additions to Personnel:**

The Selectboard needs assistance with all the demands placed on it. A part time Town Manager would help to keep the Board on track and to do the leg work on the issues objectively.

We cannot afford to maintain number of staff in office or on road crew. We have more people on payroll than any town of comparable size and tax base. Only town that spends the level we do for employee health insurance. We should have a town manager and part time clerk. Manager would also act as director of public works.

I would like to see a part-time Town Administrator put in place to 1) provide a higher level of knowledge and professionalism 2) open up the opportunity for Selectboard members to serve who otherwise would not because of the current time commitment of serving and 3) support long-term relationship building with State agencies and increased institutional memory.

Hire a part time Town Administrator, like they have in so many little towns in Vermont (ask VLCT for their data on this). This person would be directed by the Selectboard, not an independent person like the Town Clerk or Town Manager.

## **Other:**

Actively work to stop the New Vista development.

Blight enforcement

Clean up junk yards, help hoarders dispose of junk that is visible from public roads

I think the town government should be more active in defending the town from state over-reach. We should not have let the AOT plan that monster bridge into South Strafford village, without a fight.

In my recent interactions for getting a building permit the rules seemed random and the reviewers unclear and not in agreement. Clearer rules and unified application of the rules would be helpful

That the more routine functions of the process be handled in a consistent and capable way as state regulations become more complex and consistency of

knowledge is maintained across the years of transition of board members in and out of office. This also should help the board to have more time available for policy discussions and decisions. My hope is that this would make the job of select board member more desirable in the future and encourage more townspeople to run for the office.

Space out property tax payments. It seems hard for some young families to juggle tax payments that coincide with beginning of school and again with the holidays.

Bring our taxes back down we have never received the one time raise back from 2 year ago

Clearer rules for use of land and permits

**Question Three:** The town recently moved from having a Selectboard of 3 members to having a Selectboard of 5 members. Do you have an opinion about this change?

Good Idea	55%
Bad Idea	18%
Neutral	27%

Comments:

**From those who approve of the shift from 3 to 5:**

An EXCELLENT idea

I believe that 5 members allows for more continuity across elections, more lively and diverse opinion and debate, and broader representation of the community.

Having more seats is helpful so that there is a greater chance of dissenting voices & checks and balances - so that a certain kind of citizen clique doesn't take over the whole Board.

If costs are the same and board members are satisfied, seems fine

I think the larger number of selectmen can better cover responsibilities and can provide broader input into issues before the board.

The expanded membership hopefully brings more deliberation and helps stem any inclination towards corrupt practices that have been witnessed in the past.

If there is better opportunity for consensus it is a good change.

Diversity seems very important... 5 is likely to be more diverse than 3

More voices and more time for members to do their job

So two people can't run the town

Work and responsibilities are spread over a larger group.

Shares the workload more equitably.

My thought is that 5 members is a good idea, but I don't know enough about the process to have an informed opinion.

It was a three man select board that started this financial mess. The more voice the better the representation.

Three were easily controlled by one. Five were easily out of control with a group dynamic that turned toxic and resulted in bullying. But 5 is more representational, affords development of new members over time, and allows for specialization by individuals on a broader range of topics.

My sense is that there's a lot of work to do. This way if one person goes out of town or is sick, there are more people who already know what's going on and can pick up the slack. When we had three members, they seemed to divide up the tasks, each taking one aspect of town government. My sense is that they didn't have the time to discuss options with each other, but tended to have separate fiefdoms, rubber stamping each other's decisions. From watching children play, I know that three is an awkward number. Too often the new kid gets left out in the cold.

**From those who are disappointed in the shift from 3 to 5:**

I had hoped the 5-member board would result in better discussion and less ability for two (personal) opinions to prevail, but the 5-member board became as factional as a 3-person board.

I think moving to a five-member board did not produce the intended results of a shared work load and additional independent voices at the table.

Appeared to be appreciably more discord and contentiousness with 5 members.

I wonder if 5 members gain as much expertise in areas of town governance as 3 necessarily had to have. It also seems a less efficient model, or perhaps a less unified operation?

I feel like a 5 member board is less efficient.

In general, I think making a board bigger does not necessarily solve problems, but don't know enough about this change

It failed to spread the workload among more good citizens.

The size of our local government has increased, but I don't see a comparable increase in efficiency and additional services.

I don't necessarily feel it was "bad" to move to 5 but I'm not a supporter of that move. We're a really small town-do we need 5? Seems excessive.

**From those who think the number is not the important thing:**

It seems to me the quality of the people on the Selectboard is more important than the number

... I think it depends on the people not the number.

It would be a good idea if the pool of competent applicants was large enough to assure a capable board. Five members lends itself to more disagreement and dysfunction if the members are not highly qualified.

None of the above quite fits. I think that there are pros and cons to each of the two systems and am hoping that the governance committee will gain more knowledge as to how each is working in other VT towns and offer recommendations based on that knowledge.

If different people will run for office I think it is a great idea. Some problems in the past prevent people from feeling that participation in town governance is a



rewarding responsibility that can bring people together. As a result it is difficult to find fresh faces to run for office- this makes it especially difficult to fill a 5 member board

I understand how increasing the number of members can help distribute jobs, but it's still a lot of work for each person. I don't think an increase to 7 or 9 would ease that, and would probably make it even more difficult to arrive at a consensus since the larger the group, the more peer pressure comes into play. Keeping the group small and having access to other "assistants" would provide a more efficient management of difficult situations.

But I can certainly see how it reduces the time commitment for individual members of the board relating to research and fielding inquiries, things like that. Select Board members under either system contribute an unbelievable amount of time to the position, especially considering the abuse!

I think the selectboard are the folks who really know if it is working out, with the responsibilities shared, more diverse voices heard and so more people might be able to take on the position.

**Question Four: Is there anything else our committee could or should do to serve the Town?**

<b>Yes</b>	<b>28%</b>
<b>No</b>	<b>72%</b>

**Comments:**

Encourage more of a culture of high-performance, with systems for feedback.

I think it would be nice to have a written description of each job ...

Make sure there is an efficient and thorough system in place for overseeing finance.

To generate a list of citizen concerns and/or opportunities to improve the quality of life in Strafford which could be impacted by town governance - an agenda for progress- which should include enforcement of related laws and cleaning up derelict properties/junk yards, and to articulate quality standards for town governance- - list of measurable indicators and means for objective evaluation by which the town government could report on its success or failure annually.

To stay informed of best governance practices from other towns of similar size and with similar challenges

I think it would be a really good idea to figure out all the tasks that need to be done to run the town. Simultaneously, it would be good to figure out what the explicit job descriptions are for all of current town employees and offices. Then a chart could be made that shows all of the tasks and how they related to specific job descriptions. Next, the town could look at those tasks which are not currently covered by specific job descriptions and figure out if new roles need to exist to take care of those tasks. This would help the current employees and officials know what they have to be responsible for and what they should not take on as additional roles.

Recommend more training in how to manage the town that would different than how you manage your checkbook. They're amateurs who simply need a lot more training in how to step up to municipal management.

Present your findings at Town Meeting.

Provide a white paper on how our town government actually functions. Provide an article on the town website about interesting comparisons learned from examining how other towns of similar size are governed. Offer a fun facts quiz-true false and multiple choice questions, and or a town facts trivia night competition, to gauge actual knowledge. Provide a survey that allows individuals to agree or disagree with comments received in this preliminary survey. ...

**Question Five: Do you generally attend the annual Town Meeting in March?**

<b>Yes</b>	<b>72%</b>
<b>No</b>	<b>12%</b>
<b>Sometimes</b>	<b>16%</b>

**Question Six: Please indicate whether you think the Strafford Meeting House is the best public meeting space in:**

<b>Vermont</b>	<b>34%</b>
<b>The United States</b>	<b>9%</b>
<b>The World</b>	<b>57%</b>