

Rocky Hill

Interview with Mayor Lisa Marotta on April 4, 2025

1. When did Rocky Hill replace the Town Meeting with a Town Council?

There are no Town Meetings in Rocky Hill (public hearings, yes, but no Town Meetings where votes are taken). According to Internet research, Rocky Hill adopted a Town Council form of government in 1973. There are 9 members of the Town Council (including the Mayor) and they are the legislative authority for Rocky Hill. The chief executive officer is the Town Manager, hired by the Town Council, and the Mayor chairs the Town Council and is the ceremonial head of the Town.

2. Does the Town Council-Manager structure work well?

Ms. Marotta expressed general satisfaction with the Town Council form of government, and feels that it works better for Rocky Hill than a Town Meeting model. Unlike a Town Meeting where electors might be hearing certain points of view for the first time and are expected to vote immediately without the opportunity for further research, discussion, or consideration, the Town Council can take as much time as they feel is necessary to solicit and consider information and opinions before voting. She believes it is a more efficient model that probably results in better decisions.

There is no Board of Finance. Finance department employees, including the treasurer, assessor, and tax collector, report to the Director of Finance, who is appointed by and reports to the Town Manager, who reports to the Town Council. Ms. Marotta feels that making all finance department positions appointed rather than elected helps to ensure that the department is qualified and professional rather than political.

The Town Manager prepares the annual budget, publishes it and presents it to the Town Council. There are one or more public hearings about the budget, after which the Council modifies if necessary, finalizes, and adopts the budget. If the Council fails to adopt a budget by the 3rd Monday of May, the budget as presented by the Town Manager is deemed adopted. There is no budget referendum.

All department heads report to the Town Manager. The Town Manager is responsible for all operational aspects of the town, and the Town Council is responsible for political, policy, and strategic decisions. Ms. Marotta likes the council-manager form of government and feels that it works well for Rocky Hill. She noted that the success of municipal governance depends to a large extent on the quality of the people and their willingness to work together more so than the form of government.

3. What could work better?

She didn't express any significant concerns with the form of government. She thinks it might be a good idea to offer at least token compensation to the Council members for their service,

as that might make them feel they had more skin in the game. She mentioned that it can be hard to recruit volunteers for boards and commissions, and candidates for the Council. The entire Council stands for election every 2 years, including the Mayor. I asked if that was ever a problem in terms of continuity. She did not think it has ever been problematic, although she noted that the terms of appointed board and commission members are often staggered to prevent complete turnover with each election. I asked if a 9-member Council seems like the right number. She said it seems to work fine, and she wouldn't want it to be any bigger (which would probably be unwieldy).

4. Certain actions trigger automatic referenda, and in certain other cases the electors can petition to cause referenda. Does that mechanism work well?

Referenda are automatically required for borrowing in excess of \$300,000; lease-purchase agreements for personal property for more than \$300,000; and special appropriations of \$300,000 or more (individually or in the aggregate). However, no referendum is required in the case of emergencies or to finance street, sewer, or other improvements to be paid for by special assessment.

The electors may trigger a referendum to nullify a new ordinance or special appropriation by filing a petition signed by 5% of the electors within 30 days of publication of the new ordinance or special appropriation. The ordinance or appropriation is nullified if a majority vote against it and if that majority constitutes at least 10% of the total number of electors.

The electors may also cause a referendum to enact a new ordinance by filing a petition signed by 5% of the electors. The ordinance is enacted if a majority vote in favor and if that majority constitutes at least 10% of the total number of electors.

This very rarely happens. Ms. Marotta remembered one referendum in 2019, but offhand couldn't think of any others. She believes the electors have adequate input without Town Meetings or more extensive referenda rights. Public hearings are required for the adoption of the budget or any ordinance, and in an extreme case the electors do have limited rights to petition for referenda. Otherwise, biennial elections are the primary mechanism for holding public officials accountable.

5. Are there additional costs incurred with this form of government?

The members of the Town Council, including the Mayor, serve without compensation. Although hard to quantify, there is some savings from the absence of Town Meetings and from holding only infrequent referenda.

6. Are you considering changes to your form of government?

No changes under consideration.

7. What advice would you give to towns considering the replacement of Town Meetings with the establishment of a Town Council?

Do it. She isn't aware of any desire to reinstate Town Meetings in Rocky Hill.