

Weston

Interviews

- Samantha Nestor, First Selectperson, and Karl Kilduff, Town Administrator – February 27, 2025
- Jonathan Luiz, former Town Administrator – February 13, 2025

1. When was this form of government adopted?

Weston has had a Town Meeting form of government since its incorporation in 1787. The legislative authority is shared by the Town Meeting and the 3 person Board of Selectmen. The First Selectman is the Chief Executive and Chief Administrative Officer of the town.

Weston has had a Town Administrator since at least 1972. The Town Administrator a Charter position. In accordance with the Charter, the Town Administrator is hired, and can be fired, by the First Selectman, with the prior approval of the Board of Selectmen. The Town Administrator reports to the First Selectman, a part-time position.

2. Why was it adopted?

The Town Meeting form of government has a long history in Weston, having been adopted in the 18th century, and never changed. The first Town Charter was adopted in 1967, continuing the Town Meeting form of government. The Town Administrator has been part of the Weston government for decades.

3. What works well?

As background, Sam Nestor is the current First Selectman of Weston. Beginning in 2019, Sam was the Second Selectman and, in 2021, was elected First Selectman. Prior to joining the Board in 2019, she had no previous experience in a municipal government role. Her background is in interior design and communications.

Karl Kilduff is the current Town Administrator of Weston. Karl has served in various municipal roles for 25 years, including town manager of North Branford, Town Administrator of Darien and Town Manager of Clinton, before assuming the position of Town Administrator of Weston last year.

Sam and Karl agreed that the role of a Town Administrator is to provide continuity and experience to town government. The continuity is important to balance the changes in First Selectmen. The experience is important because it provides a professional to oversee some of the complex areas of government in which a First Selectman may not have prior experience. Another benefit is that the Town Administrator is non-political, leaving the political side to the First Selectman, and providing a non-partisan perspective to the operation of the town government.

Jonathan Luiz similarly expressed strong views about the importance of towns having a non-political professional, such as a Town Administrator or Town Manager, running the day to

day activities of the town. He also said such a role brings stability and continuity to town management. The benefits include (1) the importance of having a professional manager with knowledge about municipal government and operations; (2) ensuring that there is a voice in municipal government that is apolitical and unbiased; and (3) continuity.

Jonathan said that hiring a Town Administrator will allow the First Selectperson to focus on other important tasks, including relations with state bodies and agencies, relations with municipal organizations, participating in regional organizations, promoting the interests of Ridgefield and other towns, liaising with the business community, considering and deciding on policy issues and meeting with constituents.

4. What could work better?

(a) Part time First Selectman

The First Selectman position in Weston is nominally a part time position with a salary of \$48,000. Sam said that the low salary and part time role limited the number of qualified candidates that would consider running for the role. She has been engaged in recruiting the next generation and the salary has been an obstacle. She recommended that the First Selectman role be full time. This would provide adequate time to perform important functions, including regional roles like Westcog, pursuing grants, liaising with state officials, policy leadership, etc. She did not think it was ideal to have the First Selectman as a part time positions. "No one wants to go through the difficult election process just to be a figurehead. "

(b) Town Meeting

Like other towns, Weston town meetings usually have very low attendance. Sam Nestor believes the town meeting can result in undesired outcomes, particularly where a small minority shows up and makes changes to the budget that may not be supported by the majority. The example she gave was a recent town budget meeting where a few people were able to reduce a line item for snow removal and significantly reduce the services that could be provided to the town residents. She is considering a change to the Charter to eliminate the line item authority.

Jonathan Luiz believes that the town meeting form of government is no longer an effective way to run a town, and called it "dangerous" because so few residents participate in most town meetings, resulting in decisions that may not be reflective of the community's views. "A vocal minority can kill things" was one comment he made. He also believes it slows down decision-making. He said that the towns in the Hartford area have generally done away with the town meeting. He said that Town Council form of government is much better, and allows citizen participation through election of the Town Council.

5. What additional costs are incurred with this form of government?

The Town Administrator position in Weston has a salary of \$217,000. The range of likely salaries for a Town Administrator in Ridgefield would be \$200,000 - \$250,000.

6. What savings or efficiencies are realized with this form of government?

We were not able to quantify savings resulting from the role of the Town Administrator, but two areas of potential savings/efficiencies should be noted. First, Weston has a part time First Selectman with a relatively low (\$48,000) salary, which likely would not be possible without a Town Administrator. Second, Kilduff has significant municipal experience that the First Selectman does not have, potentially resulting in more effective grant proposals, better results in negotiations with unions, and other benefits that are difficult to directly measure.

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

As noted above, Weston is considering a change to the charter to eliminate the authority of the Town Meeting to reduce individual line items.

8. What advice would you give to towns considering the adoption of this form of government?

Kilduff offered a number of recommendations if we were to bring on a Town Administrator:

- The Town Administrator should be a person who is (a) experienced as a town administrator or manager who could take the reins without a great deal of training; and (b) non-political. Former First Selectmen are not the best candidates for this role because their experience is in the political realm.
- It is important to clearly identify the role and authority of the Town Administrator. Ideally, it is a Charter position where the scope of authority is established in law. But it is also possible to define the role in a job description.
- The Town Administrator should be shielded from political influence by, among other things, having a Charter or other provision that provides an agreed term and requires that he/she cannot be terminated except by a super-majority of the Board of Selectmen.
- Even where the role is defined by a charter, the responsibilities will change depending on the personality/capabilities of the First Selectman. Kilduff's experience ranged from a First Selectman who was active in managing projects, to a First Selectman who came in once a week and left Kilduff to run the town single handedly.
- In Weston, the Town Administrator job is a charter position. He operates as a COO and the First Selectman as the CEO. While the First Selectman is responsible for policy and external communications, Kilduff is responsible for the day to day administration with all department heads reporting to him, including the Finance head, the Assessor, the Tax Collector, the HR head, etc.
- Hiring an experienced Town Administrator is helpful in other ways as well, including having someone who can network with other Town Administrators to determine best practices among peer towns and providing objective, non-political advice to the Board of Selectmen. In Darien, there was a regular agenda item at the Board of Selectmen for a "Town Administrator Update".
- Illustrating the importance of a clear description of the duties of the Town Administrator is Wilton, where the role of Town Administrator is not a charter defined role, and the Town Administrator is a former first selectman, and the First Selectman is a former state official. This has resulted in uncertainty about the role of each, with difficulties working together efficiently.

Jonathan Luiz made the following recommendations if Ridgefield were to consider hiring a Town Administrator:

- The Town Administrator should function as the Chief Operating Officer of the Town, not merely as a glorified chief of staff to the First Selectman. The advantage of this approach is that the Town Administrator can provide significant benefits to town operations if he/she has authority, rather than merely a chief of staff role.
- All of the department heads, including the Director of Finance, should report to the Town Administrator.
- The Town Administrator should be hired by, and report to, the Board of Selectpersons, not to the First Selectperson. This provides the Town Administrator with the ability to operate in accordance with the policies of the full board in the event there are any disagreements.
- The Town Administrator should not perform ceremonial functions. The role should be focused on town operations and management. The First Selectperson/Board of Selectpersons should be the face of the town.
- Candidates for Town Administrator should have experience in the various functions that are required for town administration, including human resources, union negotiating, insurance, budgeting, etc.
- Jonathan recommended that the Town Administrator position be a charter position because that provides more certainty that the role is permanent and that the reporting lines are clearly drawn. He said a charter position is more likely to attract the most qualified candidates.
- The terms of employment should incentivize the behaviors that the community wants from the Town Administrator. The Town Administrator should have annual goals and his/her compensation should depend on meeting the goals. Goals and success should be evaluated in annual reviews. The Board of Selectpersons should have the ability to terminate the Town Administrator if he/she is not achieving what is expected.
- Jonathan recommended that, if hiring a Town Administrator is considered, it should be with the active support of the First Selectperson, or it is not likely to be approved and accepted.

9. Town Manager vs. Town Administrator

Because Kilduff has experience as both a Town Manager and Town Administrator, we discussed the differences. As a Town Manager, he functioned as the CEO, reporting to a Council of unpaid elected officials, all of whom had equal authority. As Town Administrator, he has reported to First Selectmen as the COO of the town.

Kilduff said that in parts of Connecticut, particularly where there is limited talent pool of potential leaders, the Town Manager/Town Council form is preferred. However, that is not the form of government generally used in Fairfield county, where there is significant leadership talent. The Town Administrator is more common here. Both are professionals who run the town day to day.

10. Who do the Town Clerk, Tax Collector, and Treasurer report to?

The Town Clerk is an elected position with a four year term. The Tax Collector and Finance Director are appointed by the Board of Selectmen and report to the Town Administrator.

11. What have you done to increase participation or improve the effectiveness of Town Meetings?

One possibility is Representative Town Meeting. Kilduff stated that although RTM is one way to get more participation, it has significant drawbacks. First, it is difficult to get sufficient numbers of candidates to run and, even if elected, to show up at meetings. Second, it “can be a nightmare to herd so many cats”, and as a result there is a tendency to avoid submitting anything to RTM vote unless it is absolutely necessary.