

TOWN OF NEW LONDON
CITIZENS' ADVISORY COMMITTEE
APRIL 2, 2005

PRESENT: Cindy Adie, Larry Ballin, Peter Bianchi, Barbara Brown, Bill Clough, Sue Clough (Selectman), Robert Foote, Bob Gray, Peggy Holliday, Mark Kaplan (Selectman), Janet Kidder, Marilyn Kidder, Bob Lavoie, D.J. Lavoie, Doug Lyon (Selectman), Bob MacMichael, Peter Messer, Jay Rosenfield, Noel Weinstein, Stephanie Wheeler, Barry Wright.

Mark Kaplan opened the meeting at 7:35 a.m.

Four issues of concern were addressed at this meeting.

1. Proposed Iraq War Veterans Readjustment Fund (Bob Foote).
2. Term limits for membership on Town boards.
3. Master Plan process.
4. Video-taping town meeting(s).

Veterans' Assistance

Bob Foote distributed copies of a March 30th memo regarding assistance to veterans, which he had previously sent to the Board of Selectmen and Town Administrator Jessie Levine. He pointed out that the veterans' credit which was passed by voters at the March Town Meeting may not be the best vehicle for meeting the special and on-going needs of returning veterans of the Iraq war and their families. Many of the veterans have had to give up businesses, or will have other on-going types of problems, and the State and Town has an obligation to provide a safety net for them and their families.

He pointed out that as the National Guard has had a disproportionate share of its members called to duty in Iraq, and as the National Guard is a State entity, he would like to approach this at the State level. To that end, he plans to discuss the initiative for an Iraq War Veterans Readjustment Fund with Randy Foose, Ricia McMahon and John DeJoie, and also at the April 20th meeting of the Sunapee Kearsarge Area Democrats, (a meeting which is open to everyone).

He wished to bring the issue to the table at today's meeting, seeking input from New London citizens.

Mark Kaplan said he has pointed to a potential need, the question now is how to solve the problem.

Bill Clough asked what kind of numbers they might be talking about.

D.J. Lavoie said there are approximately 1800 New Hampshire veterans of the Iraq war, some of who have returned and some of who are still there. She added that when those veterans are discharged, they do qualify for the veterans' property tax credit.

Bob Foote said that often the blanket credit of \$200 is not enough. He added that of those 1800, perhaps thirty or forty might have special needs.

Jay Rosenfield asked what kind of recognition Bob Foote has in mind. Would it be on a one-to-one basis, or otherwise?

Bob Foote said he feels there should be some discreet support for putting returning veterans and their families back on track. He proposed that it would be on the basis of need.

Janet Kidder asked if he has contacted the Veterans of Foreign Wars.

Bob Foote said not yet, and agreed that that would be an excellent source of information.

Noel Weinstein pointed to a potential problem with banks executing loans for veterans' and their families, and he suggested that banks be brought into the initiative, perhaps by establishing a no-fault policy. Perhaps the State could pick up on this, or provide some means of financial support.

Sue Clough suggested Bob Foote call Senator Odell who has been working on updating laws to include all veterans. She suggested that would be a way to bridge the two parties on this initiative.

Bob MacMichael said he feels New London will always support veterans. He cited the New London Service Organization which was established to assist veterans (including with loans) after World War II, and which has expanded its services, and remains on-going. He mentioned also the American Legion, and the Veterans Administration. Keith Fleury of Wilmot is a good contact for that last. He also pointed out that the Thursday edition of the Manchester Union Leader is a good source of information for and about veterans.

The consensus of the CAC was that this is a good initiative, and that taking it to the State level is the way to go with it.

Term Limits for Membership on Town Boards

Mark Kaplan said the Board of Selectmen has met recently with chairs and some members of the Planning Board, Zoning Board of Adjustment and Conservation Commission regarding this issue. The question that has been raised is: Is it appropriate to replace someone just for the sake of replacing them; that is, to have a rule requiring that? He said that at that Select Board meeting, the point was made that there is a substantial time frame for the learning process to occur on these Boards, and that learning process is necessary before a member can contribute to making future policy for the Town.

Noel Weinstein said that his feeling is that, if the term belongs to a position of some authority, it is not a good idea for one person to continue in it indefinitely. On the other hand, he has no problem with longevity (of membership) for those committees on which no one person is in control. He pointed to this, the Citizens' Advisory Committee, as an example of the latter. In either case, he would definitely favor rotation of the Chairman.

Larry Ballin pointed to the low return of applications for membership on Town boards. He pointed out that, other than those who have an interest in the issue before the Board (i.e. applicants and abutters), very few people attend planning or zoning board meetings just out of interest in the process itself. He also expressed support for the idea of rotating chairpersons.

He went on to say that effective membership on the planning and zoning boards requires a fair amount of training. Other than several annual seminars which address zoning and planning in general within the state and which are attended by the new in-coming members, most of that training, and particularly that which is specific to New London's regulations and ordinances, is gained on-the-job. He said that establishing term limits just to get a numerical equation would not serve the Town well. He expressed concern about the possibility of persons with special agendas being appointed to many seats on the boards. The Town is running well now; he does not see a need for a change.

Jay Rosenfield asked what the length of a term is now.

Each term for appointees is three years, with no limit to the number of times one can be reappointed.

Jay Rosenfield suggested they consider limiting that to two three-year terms, then require that the person be off the Board for a number of years before seeking reappointment. He understands that the reserve of volunteers is skimpy now, but suggested that more might be interested in applying if they knew they had a chance to get on.

He pointed out that rotation of membership would force out some new creative ideas. There will always be a learning process required over the first year or two, but he suggested that six (consecutive) years should be the limit.

Barry Wright said that basically he opposes term limits. He suggested the Town leave well enough alone. The number of terms should be handled by the voters. He pointed out that the (elected) Selectmen are responsible for appointing the best people, people who will act according to the wishes of the Town, to those positions, with the understanding that there may be times when a board member should be replaced.

Marilyn Kidder said she agrees with Jay Rosenfield. She pointed out that in the private sector, institutions are run by Boards, and the Boards themselves seek out qualified people for membership. Most limit their terms to three, of three years each, then require that a person be off for a year. She feels the initial learning curve is a benefit. It forces the Boards to ask new questions, and to rethink issues that may have become taken for granted. With rotation of membership, a Board will always have a certain number of experienced members, as well. In addition, term limits give incumbents a chance to take a breather. If there is reluctance to lose those experienced people, they can be put on advisory committees which do not require attendance at every meeting, do not vote, but do allow the Boards to continue benefiting from those persons' wisdom. She feels that when it becomes time to rotate membership of a position on a board, three or four phone calls to qualified people in Town would elicit at least one willing new member. She definitely agrees with rotating the chairs.

Bob Gray also approves of the idea of rotating Chairs, but would be opposed to forcing people to get off boards due to term limits.

Sue Clough and Mark Kaplan pointed out that the Zoning Board and Conservation Commission do have alternate members, and it has been suggested that the Planning Board should as well.

Stephanie Wheeler said she feels a good compromise between term limits and no term limits would be terms of three years duration, limited to two reappointments, then requiring at least one year off before a fourth reappointment. She pointed out that that would allow a person to be a member for nine years, but still assure that new people are getting onto the committee.

Peter Bianchi said the critical thing is that the Selectmen read the tenor of the Town before making the appointments to board positions. He suggested that after a person serves two terms, there be careful consideration prior to a second reappointment. It is not a good idea for one person to hold several positions.

He also suggested that recruitment for membership might be better done through calls from the Selectmen, rather than by asking people to fill out application forms.

Jay Rosenfield agreed that the average guy is not going to fill out a form. Recruiting good board members requires some reaching out. He acknowledged that that puts the burden on the appointing committee (in this case, the Board of Selectmen), but he feels there are some hidden gems in Town waiting to be tapped.

Doug Lyon pointed out that the Selectmen do not have the legislative authority to limit terms on a board. That would have to be done through the appointment process, and any subsequent group of selectmen could change policy. He said that at the recent meeting of the Selectmen and board representatives, it was pointed out that there is already rotation of membership by virtue of attrition.

He pointed out that the difference between a Town committee and a not-for-profit's board (which is basically a private organization), is that the former conducts all business in public session. Anyone is free to attend and encouraged to speak.

Marilyn Kidder asked how other towns handle this.

Sue Clough said that Jessie Levine conducted an informal survey and found that they (the processes for filling positions, and limiting terms or not) were “all over the board,” and some were mixed within towns.

Mark Kaplan said the size of the town does make a difference.

Marilyn Kidder said she would guess the percentages are the same, though.

Several commented that the rate of volunteerism seems higher in New London, and that membership on this Citizens Advisory Committee is a good introduction to town service.

Jay Rosenfield asked if the boards have charters.

Doug Lyon and Larry Ballin said the State has recommendations, and RSAs exist for establishment of the boards, but not for term limits.

D. J. Lavoie asked if this issue should be decided by voters.

Mark Kaplan said that the voters have left it up to the Board of Selectmen to make those decisions. The Selectmen do listen to the Town before making appointments.

Sue Clough reminded this meeting that two years ago, a petition to make positions on the zoning and planning boards elected rather than appointed, was presented, tabled, and withdrawn without a vote.

Doug Lyon said that in considering whether or not to change current policy, voters should look at the results of current policy.

Bob MacMichael reminded everyone how difficult it was to get the zoning ordinance established years ago, and he pointed to how well that has worked since.

Sue Clough said the Selectmen are really looking to the future. They feel that now is a good time to encourage the boards to set up some self-governing policy.

Master Plan

Doug Lyon said that the Town is now gearing up for work on the Master Plan. One of the recommendations made in the recent (September 13, 2004) Bennett Yarger Associates New London Police Department Study Report, was: “In conjunction with the Town, the Police Department should establish a Mission Statement and a Vision Statement.” The study pointed out that one benefit of developing such a statement would be the enhancement of communication.

Mark Kaplan said the Selectmen have met with Senator Odell, and one of the issues which came out at that meeting was the projected expansion of I-93, which will only serve to increase growth in this area. Growth is going to continue, and the question is how to best manage it.

Jay Rosenfield pointed to a recent trend of big box stores being developed approximately every thirty miles, most recently now in Hillsborough, and how such stores change the culture of a town. He pointed out that New London is approximately thirty miles north of Concord and thirty miles south of Lebanon, so may be vulnerable. He asked if New London and its adjoining towns have any provision to prevent that.

Mark Kaplan agreed that that would change the culture of the town, but is not sure about the word “prevent.” If someone buys enough land, and can conform to the zoning, or are able to obtain the necessary special exceptions or variances, there is nothing to prevent that from happening.

Sue Clough said that is really a function of zoning and planning. The size of New London's commercial district would not be conducive to a big box store, and the area around the interstate exits are not zoned for commercial development. She said that New London can't do anything about what happens in adjoining towns.

Jay Rosenfield asked if there are any controls for design or structure. Can it be suggested in the zoning laws or master plan that there be no 50,000 square-foot retail outfits?

It is not clear whether such a limitation can be written into the zoning ordinance. Right now, there is no limit on building size in New London's zoning ordinance, though the ordinance does have a height limitation.

Peggy Holliday said that some Vermont towns have been able to keep out Walmart.

Jay Rosenfield said the Town should set up some protection in advance, so that it is not forced to act after the fact, as Hillsborough is.

Sue Clough said that is the purpose of the Master Plan.

Larry Ballin said New London has always been pro-active with its zoning ordinance. An example is the Community Center. The group promoting that was denied a special exception to locate that in the originally proposed location, but has since succeeded in getting the special exception and variances required, by finding a better and more appropriate location for the center.

He said that from a cost and market stand-point, New London is not a likely place for a big box store. The Town has a very narrow corridor for commercial use.

Jay Rosenfield recommended that the Selectmen discuss this with contiguous towns.

Stephanie Wheeler asked about an architectural review process.

Sue Clough said that idea was proposed years ago, and soundly defeated.

Jay Rosenfield suggested it be tried again.

Marilyn Kidder commented that the previous Master Plan process was a great one, and she asked if it is the Planning Board's intent to follow the same process with the upcoming Master Plan work.

Mark Kaplan said the Master Plan work is an outgrowth of the Planning Board's responsibilities. Karen Ebel has indicated that they will follow the same process as was followed previously, including distributing a questionnaire to residents, soliciting public input, and setting up sub-committees.

She will be invited to a meeting of the CAC to discuss that process.

Town Meeting—To tape or not to tape?

Mark Kaplan said suggestion that Town Meetings be video-taped for later showings has been raised, and the Selectmen would like to have this Committee's thoughts on that idea.

Noel Weinstein said it is a good one, and might stimulate more people to come to the meeting. It would make everything open for viewing, and show that Town government is not hiding anything. He conceded that some people might have tendency to "show-boat" (in front of the camera), and some people may feel intimidated by it.

Marilyn Kidder suggested that it would be helpful for people who cannot make the meeting.

Sue Clough added that it would also be helpful to people who are out of Town that night.

Peter Bianchi asked if the Town Meetings are audio-taped now.

Yes, as are the Zoning Board of Adjustment hearings.

The consensus of the Citizens' Advisory Committee was favorable to the idea of video-taping the Town Meetings in the future.

This meeting adjourned at 9 a.m.

Respectfully submitted,

S.A. Denz
Recording Secretary