Town of Swanzey, New Hampshire
Swanzey Governance Committee
Meeting – August 25, 2025
Whitcomb Hall
17 Main Street, Swanzey, NH

CALL TO ORDER

The meeting was called to order by Chair Ann Heffernon, at 5:30pm. at Whitcomb Hall, Main Street, Swanzey, NH. Other members present were Michael York, Vice Chair, Dan LeClair, Richard Lane, Francis Faulkner, Jessica Ramsey-Sanchez, Scott Self, Eric May, Mark Scalera, David Stinson, Selectmen Mark LaBelle and Cathy Bergstrom via phone call. Also present was Recording Secretary Susan Ells.

MINUTES

The regular meeting minutes of August 21, 2025, were considered. There was a motion by LeClair to approve the minutes as presented; the motion was seconded by May and there was no further discussion. All were in favor and the motion passed.

NEW BUSINESS

Chair Heffernon welcomed the group and said in the next day or two she will send out the tentative schedule through October; she plans for alternating Mondays evenings at 5:30pm except one in September where there is a conflict; and afternoons of Wednesday and/or Friday; from 3-5pm so that those who are interested in serving can attend since they are not available in the evening. Lane asked if the afternoon meetings will be reviewing the Monday meetings or if it will be new discussions. Heffernon said some information might be new, but all will have the information on what was discussed at the Monday evening meetings. Lane asked how a 2/3 majority could be accomplished. Heffernon said that Mondays will have the most attendance, except 2 people who can't attend. Self said less than 9 members is not a quorum, so a discussion can't occur. Heffernon asked everyone to look at the schedule she sends and let her know if they can attend. LeClair asked for clarification if discussions could occur on the off days. Lane reiterated that if there is not a quorum, items can't be discussed. LeClair asked if people drop out, can the committee be restructured for the reduced number and was told that could occur.

York made a motion that a member must be present to vote; LeClair seconded. Stinson asked why York felt so strongly. York replied that in his experience he can't always hear the details on the phone. Heffernon said she would like to do research on this before a vote is made. York withdrew his motion and then made a motion to table the subject. Scalera seconded. All were in favor and the motion passed unanimously.

Heffernon suggested breaking into two groups to discuss which ideas are the most feasible; Ramsey-Sanchez asked for clarification of what 'going back to town meeting' means. Heffernon explained that in the past, Town meeting was held once a year and included discussing the warrant articles and then voting on them; a lot more people attended and were better informed than what is happening now which is a deliberative session to discuss and possibly amend a warrant article. Then the voting happens weeks later. People are not as likely to be informed so they don't vote effectively, or they don't vote at all. Lane said it can be an all-day affair. There would be an agenda and a schedule for items to be discussed; people can voice their opinions and suggest amendments. Then the article is closed and voted on. Then they moved on to the next article. Self reiterated it's all done in one meeting versus the way it's done now by deliberative session where the warrants can be amended; then the voting is on another day.

The committee broke into two groups for discussion of possibilities of town government. We will reconvene and determine which ideas are most feasible and how to move forward with them. .

Group one: York, Stinson, May, Faulkner, LeClair
York explained that under the old process, historically it been an evening meeting; it could last several hours. With the current deliberative session, generally only a few show up and determine the ballot for voting day. Faulkner said at the most there were 250-300 people who would show up. Faulkner said now there is 1400 – 1500 residents who have voted recently which shows how small the percentage is of those who attended the deliberative session to hear about the items on the ballot.

The group reviewed the handout with the versions of government.

LaClair asked how the group felt about a Town Council version of government. They felt that the Town is not large enough because wards would be needed; more administration would be needed; more cost for a Town manager and staff.

York explained there are two ways to put an item on a warrant; planning board can put it on the warrant, or it can be by petition.

The subject of creating a budget committee was brought up and there was interest in pursuing that idea.

Stinson said he likes the idea of returning to the Town meeting system so that more people can be informed. We don't have time to create a charter.

May said that recommendations should be clear with a few bullet points for the reasons to support. He feels the Town has been successful on Facebook, but he wonders how can we connect with the generation of 30–40-year-olds. We need succinct answers and visuals on PowerPoint.

Group two: Heffernon, LaBelle, Self, Ramsey-Sanchez, Lane, Scalera, and Bergstrom (via phone). Heffernon took notes for this group. (As noted in meeting, I am remiss with names in a process where I am leading and taking notes, I apologize)

Town Manager – Hybrid format with selectboard
Town Meeting **-** Format is given by Self & Lane. Polls open at 8:00 until 7:00 Polls are for zoning and elected officers only , the balance is voting right at town meeting on warrants. Ballot would be shorter but the business meeting will start at 5 or 6 and then you discuss warrant articles so this can be a long process. The Moderator runs this part of the meeting.

Additionally have information sessions on specific items open to all residents and well publicized. For example, with an open town meeting water company purchase would probably have passed.
Bergstrom suggests one topic at a time. She had town meetings when she was a selectperson.
If we personally invite people to these meetings, more people will come and the better off and better informed will be as a town.

Hybrid possibilities-
Town Manager has all power

Town Manager w/ selectboard sharing
Town Meeting/Town council This is flexible, residents from each part of the town with an at will chair . The chair has deciding vote if there is a draw. They would be elected. They take the vote on expenditures instead of the town. The chair has the same amount of vote as other members. Simple majority but could also be super majority. This may be governed by state statute and certain dollar amounts would be voted on. How would we make the divisions for said council? This could be done by population.
The Board would have power. Not selectboard

Town Council – broader representation? Pros and Cons-
Difficult to do districts. If you go by population larger districts can outweigh smaller districts.
It would be a challenge to get people to understand this concept and vote for it.

Town manager who has authority with no election (they should live here). Could Lori do this? It would take some time to get her up to gear and a search and three years to get a new person. Pro- less time for Selectboard, too much authority for manager. Pro is things may be done more expediently. Con we would need to hire an admin person for them (additional salary). Selectboard would manage manager.

Town Admin with selectboard is working now. We are more representative with 5 selectpeople. It eliminates the power situation and gives us a better chance at better representation and more variety of point of view. The voters determined they want five. We need to help find ways to help. Some voters do not feel represented, hence five, it will bring more diverse opinions and discussions. (Meet the candidate and debates).

Town Meeting – either 3 or as it is stated it is the purest form of town gov. This changed because people were afraid to speak out publicly at meetings. This changed in 2002? Our group would be open to town meeting, but lumped in warrant articles are a problem. They could be broken down in a town meeting and information sessions.

The groups reconvened: Heffernon asked for feedback from the discussions.

Stinson said that the other choices don't solve the problem of having people not informed so they felt returning to the traditional town meeting was their choice.

Heffernon's group felt that we could have more informational meetings to inform people about the issues; this would not be instead of town meeting but might enhance them.

Both groups feel that we still need some deliberative or informational sessions so that the public can learn what is being recommended and to give feedback.

York said their group was discussing adding a budget committee to have more involvement to work with the selectboard.

Self said they discussed 3 forms of government; pros and cons on all; Pros are a town manager would mean less work for selectmen, and things would get done quicker. Cons are there is more cost of administration for salary and support staff. He said a Town council would run everything; we'd have to determine how to elect

them by creating wards and there would be less representation; but pros are for larger populations than Swanzey.

Stinson asked if they talked about representative town meetings; Self said no, but it is in the form of Town Council.

The consensus seems as though this group is interested in recommending that the Town return to traditional Town Meetings.

The discussion turned to the subject of the composition of the Selectboard changing to 5 members from 3 which was voted for at the recent election; it could be reverted to 3 people by another ballot article, but since it was approved by vote, we'd have to have at least one year of 5 members. LeClair asked for cons for 5 members; York said the pros he heard were there would be more diversity of opinions. Ramsey-Sanchez stated that it seemed to go against the voters if we don't at least try the 5 selectboard team that was voted on.

Regarding cons about a 5 member board, Heffernon said that some of the smaller towns have switched to 5 selectboard team and she heard they feel it's not ideal – Winchester and Hinsdale for example have 5 selectboard. She suggested there could be a job description to make sure people know what they are running for when they sign up and for voters to know what the job is so they can make informed decisions.

Lane suggested having Q&A sessions for candidates so voters can get to know who is running; Heffernon added we could perhaps have debates. LeClair said he was concerned that too much focus on the requirements of the job might make otherwise willing candidates withdraw.

Heffernon reminded the group that she is sending a tentative schedule for feedback.

Stinson suggested starting to work on PowerPoint at the next meeting. Heffernon asked who can create a PowerPoint. LeClair said he could if needed. Heffernon will ask the other committee members who were not present in case anyone else has experience and is willing to help.

Ramsey-Sanchez clarified we will be working on recommending the Town return to a Traditional Town meeting and will be providing informational meetings. One of the meetings could describe the positions to be voted on and inform the voters of what the jobs are that are on the ballot.

Scalera made a motion to focus on recommending returning to a traditional town meeting first, Lane seconded. All in favor were in favor and the motion carried.

ADJOURNMENT

There was a motion by Scalera to adjourn the meeting which was seconded by LeClair; there was no further discussion. All were in favor and the motion passed. Adjournment occurred at 7:02pm.

Respectfully Submitted,
Susan Ells, Recording Secretary

Approved on 9.3.25