
MEMORANDUM

TO: NORWICH SELECTBOARD
FROM: STEPHEN N. FLANDERS
SUBJECT: CONDUCT OF SB MEETINGS
DATE: OCTOBER 14, 2015
CC: TOWN MANAGER

1. *Overview*—I wish to thank the incumbent chair of the Norwich Selectboard for being willing to perform that often-challenging job. The main role of the chair is to help the board succeed in its deliberations—sometimes difficult when opinions differ and emotions rise. In doing so, the chair must subordinate her role as a member of the board to assure impartiality in guiding the board’s deliberations. The chair traditionally has additional duties, namely to act as the spokesperson and representative of the board on those matters, which the board has agreed to. The chair is also expected to coordinate receipt of member contributions and distribution of materials, as agreed to by the board.

I have some commendations and recommendations to extend to the incumbent Norwich Selectboard chair.

2. *Commendations*—I appreciate that most of the time the chair has opened discussions for contributions from other board members, before adding her personal perspective on a given topic. This was true during the deliberations leading to the second bond vote on the town’s facility upgrades. I also appreciate that the chair led a discussion leading to a way forward for town facilities after both votes.
3. *Recommendations*—I have noted with concern that the chair seems to be exhibiting more frequent lapses in impartiality, since selectboard meetings resumed in August. Two cases in point are:
 - The chair has, on occasion, reacted to a contribution made by another member with, “That’s your opinion.” Clearly, we all express our opinion, but using that phrase demeans the speaker and diminishes the contribution. A simple, “Thank you” is more appropriate.
 - In a recent event, the chair cut off discussion of a future agenda item with no explicit consensus on that item at the point when the option that she preferred arose. Nonetheless, members made motions on additional options, which carried with the chair as the sole dissenter. The remedy for this would be to poll the board to confirm a consensus.

The chair appears not to understand, at times, what other members have said, as evidenced when synopsisizing statements in a manner that do not reflect what was said. A remedy for this would be to use reflective listening—paraphrasing what was said at times to confirm the thrust of the statement, e.g. “Do I understand you to mean...?” It would also help to summarize the discussion before converging on a motion with something, like, “We have heard points A. B. and C. made..., is someone ready to make a motion?”

An important challenge for the chair is to lead discussions, when the chair disagrees with the majority. This calls on the ability of the chair to lead the discussion impartially, while retaining the right to participate as a member of the board. It also makes it more difficult to represent the board’s decision to the public. In a situation like this, the chair may opt to have the vice-chair guide the discussion.

A level of achievement that I have seldom seen from any chair of the selectboard is the ability to bring disparate points of view together to form a consensus—a result that all members find acceptable, even when it is not the preferred outcome of some members. This requires a willingness of the members to compromise. This is more difficult for a chair to achieve when the chair prefers one particular outcome and finds other solutions unacceptable.