

Minutes
Culture, History and Governance (CHuG)
Sub-Committee
March 26, 2008

Present:

BOS: Sarah Canon-Holden, Sara Mattes, Gary Taylor, Tim Higgins

CHuG: Susan Brooks, Paul Giese, Mark Hochman, Nancy Henderson, Jack MacLean, Karen Keane, Harriet Todd, Peter Sugar

The topic was Governance; we discussed the following:

- Introduction: We had sent the BOS copies of our 'Ideas for Possible Changes in Town Government' (a Draft, not yet distributed to anyone), which was based on our Board Survey results and the comments we received during the break-out sessions on Governance at the Forum on 9 February. We are also currently waiting on the results of the Town-wide survey, which will further modify our approach. The meeting was then opened for general discussion
- The BOS felt that we should not speak of problems: how can we be so certain that there are in fact any problems; if we based our approach on commentary, how do we know that these comments are not just raised by individuals, who happened to be present when there may be others with a different view-point
- We should be looking at other towns – our surrounding neighbors and even others – to see what they look like, whether they have the same issues and perspectives. Our approach should not be one arrived at in isolation, thus making assumptions as to existing 'problems' without adequate confirmation and background checks.
- Only after we have conducted such an investigation, can we begin to state our conclusions, which should include our recommendations, who will be responsible for implementation, what the mechanism should be for implementation, and the cost for such
- We should in addition contact MMA to get an understanding of what their perspective is about governance issues and civic engagement, which would then provide us with a frame of reference.
- We pointed out that, as a volunteer committee, our time, as well as the time available for the completion of our work, was limited, and thus many of the tasks may have to be left as part of the Master Plan and its implementation: we may only be able to frame the issues and suggest solutions. This will in all probability also be true, even with the use of our consultants (COG)
- The BOS felt that our 'Ideas' was a dangerous document in some of its assumptions: (1) there already was a great deal of transparency in the way town government operated, (2) we shared many services – e.g. in engineering and health issues - with surrounding towns, and (3) on land-use have achieved cooperation between several of the boards - thus these issues were no longer pertinent.
- We pointed out that many of us actually preferred to state our assumptions as questions rather than statements, thus encouraging more objective inputs, while recognizing that positive statements, even though unsubstantiated, might better elicit interesting responses.
- The BOS requested that we get a better handle on who responded to our Board survey (i.e. which boards and whether the respondents were current or past members) – as some of the past members may not be fully cognizant of progress made in recent years
- We asked for some specific responses from the BOS on particular issues and possibilities. We started with volunteerism, stating that we had heard many comments concerning the dwindling ranks of volunteers in the Town to fill the ranks of the many Committees and sub-committees ... particularly qualified volunteers with time to commit. The BOS disagreed unanimously. Their feeling was that there were plenty of volunteers – the supply in Town was more than adequate – but that the real problem lay in recruiting, training, supporting and coordinating volunteers.
- We commented that leadership and the development of potential future leaders was a critical goal. The BOS did not agree with the pro-active priority we gave this. The BOS felt, generally, that if volunteers could be properly coordinated and supported, the development of leaders for appropriate roles in Town governance would follow naturally.
- We discussed together the changing population mix – the demographics – this may also have a good deal of influence on how the future of our town will be shaped. How can we assure that the

institutional memory is retained? When did this work in the past, and how do we recapture the qualities which make Lincoln what it is today?

- We discussed together the importance of determining Lincoln's long range objectives: how do we define this, what are the shorter term steps implied to get there, what are the costs and benefits, and then how should this implemented?
- Volunteerism: the BOS had for some time tried to find either a volunteer coordinator or a committee – to track able citizens for potential board/committee assignment. Not an easy task. There seems to be no shortage of volunteers, at least those working for certain special interests (e.g. the PTA, Friends of the Library, etc.) but it is hard to get these people to commit to a more general or official position in governance. (One missing link is that in the past we had the League of Women Voters, and also the Welcoming Committee who helped, but who are no longer functioning - though there is now an attempt to revive the latter.)
- Time commitment is a problem: a better description of how the big boards work and the complexity of issues they face would be helpful
- Staff support: the first tier of boards is well supported, but this is less true for the second tier boards: more clerical support would help. Some of the difficulty stems from the fact that we are a small town and thus lack economies of scale to support dedicated staff for each board (from an expense point of view.)
- We discussed the benefit of having the ability to lay our hands quickly on past records and data to assist in handling daily problems and exploring solutions: a good data base and a more sophisticated electronic data system is an essential need but this is an enormous and expensive task and our IT department is a department of one!
- Training: This is critical for volunteers and a real necessity to provide to new board members who often do not even understand what a particular board's mission is, and even if given the necessary documentation, find little time to educate themselves. Again: training requires time commitment - always hard to come by. New members also need to understand the difference between policy and operations
- The BOS suggested that we review past planning efforts – documentation produced in the 70's, 80's and 90's to see how these recommendations have progressed (we have already begun to do so!)
- We asked if the BOS should be expanded – to five (5) for example: the BOS responded that three members enable the BOS to conduct their business by consensus which is preferable and less political and would be hard to do were the size of the BOS be increased. They believe that with their excellent staff they are able to cope, though it is admitted that the priority issues come first and some of the secondary issues may get postponed/dropped. (Each town has its own way of governing and the BOS of Bedford, Lexington and Concord are quite different from each other and from Lincoln.)
- There followed some interesting discussion as to whether we could have a second tier of selects, a 'shadow BOS' as it were, with the idea that these members would eventually be promoted – but the problem obviously is that there is no guarantee that they would be elected, not to mention the fact that no one would accept the secondary role because of the time commitment required
- A major discussion point revolved around regionalization. In the future, Lincoln will be increasingly impacted from outside forces and developments, including State mandates on zoning, wetlands, land developments in neighboring towns, traffic, etc. Increasingly the Town and its governing boards will have to monitor, coordinate, participate, and implement region wide plans, and the question discussed was how to do this. HATS seemed the best example for addressing regional cooperation successfully, but the approach would have to be designed flexibly and one needs to determine if the regional group should be at the Committee level, or the Town leadership level and how to arrange it with other towns.
- There followed a brief discussion on the various planning bodies which affect Lincoln's planning efforts and how these cooperate with each other (MAPC, MAGIC, HATS, 128 corridor, et al.) All of them are part of the regional perspective which bears on our own efforts, though cooperation is key – but which can only be maintained by real time commitment and presence at all their meetings!
- The biggest challenges which face our town are the preservation of our values which run counter to some of the economic pressures and mandates superimposed on us from the outside by the state and the federal government. Some even suggested that we may wish to employ a lobbyist

for Lincoln to push our agenda - this will become even more critical as time passes since our representatives (reps, senators, and congressmen) are likely to come from the larger towns around us.

- Communication is another issue and a constant comment and complaint from Townspeople. There is however a serious question as to whether or not people would take advantage of solutions (it's too easy to complain and excuse). An obverse problem is the impediment of the Open Meeting Law – more than ever now in the electronic age – which actually restrains (and possibly could legally punish) too much communication between committee members outside rigid constraints
- CHuG was advised to keep our objectives and conclusions basic and straight-forward, and save the resolution and planning for complexity for follow-up and implementation. Otherwise there will be no way to accomplish our mission within the CLRPC time frame.

The BOS agreed to look at our paper and mark it up with their commentary.

Next meeting: We will give next week a miss and meet again in two weeks – on 9 April at 7:30 AM at the Library.