

Minutes
Culture, History and Governance (CHuG)
Sub-Committee
May 21, 2008

Present:

CHuG: Susan Brooks, Paul Giese, Mark Hochman, Karen Keane, Jack MacLean, Peter Sugar
COG: Angela Meehan

We briefly reviewed the SC meeting of yesterday, where it was agreed to make a presentation to the BOS on 23 June. Also discussed was the fact that COG expects to have completed all papers in draft form by the end of May (we expressed some doubt whether it will really happen for CHuG's Governance paper)

We then turned to the questions Angela wished to discuss with us in order to help COG with the governance do-nothing scenario:

- What in fact will the do-nothing scenario deal with? It will certainly embody the culture of the Town – and based on any concerns which we may have at this time about any aspect of the Town's governance, how will these concerns play out if there is no corrective action taken in response?
- Questions which we will be discussing are:
 - The decreasing attendance at Town Meeting
 - Volunteer participation
 - Regionalization
 - Access to Town government – e.g. the website and information flow between the citizenry and the Town
- In response to our earlier question to Angela on whether there was any data available from other towns, it appears that there is no formalized data base and only ad hoc information retrievable from other towns on a one-on-one basis. The observation was made that, anecdotally, attendance is down in other towns as well.
- We wondered whether the TM form of government is outdated and whether we might move towards a more representative form of government – perhaps to have a stronger executive and even to have a mayor – e.g. like as city. Apparently one cannot change to a city-type government just by wishing to do so – there are certain numerical impediments one would have to overcome first (e.g. minimum number of citizens to qualify as a city, etc.)
- We continued to wonder about regional and state trends – but this may have to become a future task.
- At the same time, we continue to believe that Lincoln likes its form of TM government. Thus the real questions are: how to reinforce this intent, how to wake up Lincoln as it were and how to bring more people to TM?
- It can be said that TM attendance is somewhat age-related - people with younger children may have greater difficulty in attending (baby-sitting issues, etc.) We wondered whether our recent survey could give us more information on the age cohorts of the attendees (some towns in fact tabulate this as people sign in)
- One thing our survey does indicate is that there is a definite correlation between people attending recreation and conservation programs and then also attending TM
- There is a feeling that we could increase attendance by simply asking people to come. The Lincoln League of Women Voters was effective in doing just that for its meetings – unfortunately we no longer have the local branch
- Attendance may be influenced by the generally depressing surroundings (inadequate lighting!)
- Other influences on attendance are the fact that important subjects such as the budget, zoning ordinances, etc. are often thoroughly vetted before TM and thus the ensuing discussion at TM has little influence on the outcome
- Another issue is SOTT – which was a Lincoln innovation; on the other hand SOTT removes some interesting topics and discussion from TM and this may also be a factor

- Thus the question remains: where is the center of discussion – at TM? or at specific board meetings (FinCom, School Committee, etc.)?
- Is there some reticence at speaking on the TM floor? Some people have difficulties in expressing their thoughts in public before a large audience – and thus there usually is only a handful of speakers – and the same ones! – who speak at TM.
- The TM form of government could be defined as one of civic duty – all citizens sharing the burden of decision making
- We turned to Volunteerism – as stated previously, there seems to be no shortage of volunteers for specific boards, interest-groups, etc. What is harder is to have people step forward for the more exposed positions of public duty (Selectmen, School Committee, ...), open to others' views and criticisms
- Possibly the issue is one of living in the 21st rather than the 19th century, where now most of us are differently engaged with the outside world, and thus having less time available
- One volunteers as a part of one's civic duty. Thus there ought to be more education of the public as to how town government functions and how efficient it is
- Civics should have more emphasis at being taught at school and thus one could then rely on the children teaching their parents about civics. This could become a question of encouraging people to take leadership positions – rather than just volunteering for certain boards/committees as part of their 'work force'
- Here the question surfaced again as to a volunteer coordinator: with such a person having a list of the skill sets of the town's citizens, people could be asked to step forward when certain needs arise.
- By not having adequate numbers of volunteers, in some instances we may be ending up with people in positions with not the right 'fit' as it were
- Some people run for positions because they consider it is their civic duty, while others may run only from a sense of personal gratification
- Having a live/public TV presence may also be problematic and discourage participation
- Are we sure that we welcome all volunteers? - or is there a push-back from the 'establishment' against some who may be perceived as not having the right 'Lincoln' values
- We strayed briefly into land-use: mansionization, in concentrating on an aesthetic and life-style perhaps more in keeping with outdated values rather than 21st century philosophy directly affects how we use our land and thus may work at cross purposes with the rural character of the Lincoln we are attempting to retain
- Regionalization: we emphasized that this may not always work to our benefit – unless there has been a long historical and cultural relationship with an adjacent town.
- Frequently, the larger town controls the relationship and not to our liking: e.g. LSRHS, where Sudbury has failed to pass overrides and thus lacked the ability to provide adequate financial support – its share (!) - which will eventually result in a diminution of the quality of education at this excellent high-school, which would be Lincoln's loss.
- How can we gain strategic benefits from regional arrangements? It was noted that a regional pact does not have to be permanent and can be broken if we find that it hurts rather than helps us.

We have yet to discuss Information Flow/Communication

Next meeting: We will meet on Wednesday, 5/28 at 7:30 AM at the Library – note: Angela will again attend to complete her discussion with us.