



Policy Brief 2021:03

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Town of Canandaigua: Sustaining Leadership

The Case Study Series

This review of change in governance and administration in the Town of Canandaigua, New York is one in a series of communities in New York that took initiative to change the administration of their local government. These local initiatives were reviewed and summarized in 2020-21 by the Public Management Program (PMP), Department of Public Administration, SUNY Brockport. The cases were examined to provide insights for other local leaders and citizens in New York about options for change in local administration and governance. They examine (1) how initiatives for administrative change got started, (2) how local leaders and citizens responded to the initiative and moved forward, (3) the barriers and useful resources that were identified in the process, and (4) the experience since a change has been adopted - or not.

Canandaigua Community and Region

The Town of Canandaigua is in the western portion of New York's Finger Lakes Region and located within Ontario County, southeast of the City of Rochester, New York. The town nearly surrounds the City of Canandaigua (2020 population 10,576) and includes an ample portion of Canandaigua Lake shoreline and shares a municipal border with seven other towns in Ontario County.

The town's total population of 11,109 in 2020 reflected a growth of 11% since 2010. This reflects a slower rate of growth from the

previous decade. The town is among the largest 20% of towns statewide in total population.

In 2010 Ontario County had a population of 112,458 and has experienced relatively uninterrupted long-term population growth. The county legislative body is a Board of Supervisors. Town supervisors (and thus the Town of Canandaigua Supervisor) have dual roles; serving as chief elected officials for their respective towns and a seat on the county legislative body. Cities in the county are represented on the county board by separately elected "supervisors."

Town Service and Financial Profile

The town provides a range of services to residents. The town highway department maintains 120 miles of town roads. The water department serves portions of the town including 2,700 customers. In addition, the town water department contracts to provide water services to water districts in three smaller adjacent towns: Bristol, East Bloomfield, and Hopewell.

The town provides solid waste services including a drop-off transfer station free to residents. The parks department operates and maintains nine parks with 182 acres of parkland. The parks offer cabins and pavilions of various sizes for rent, as well as a variety of playgrounds, trails, and activity fields. Policing and law enforcement services are provided primarily by the Ontario County Sheriff's

¹Footer Note Text

Department with supplemental policing provided via contract. Fire and emergency services provided by a cluster of local agencies.

Budgeted town operating expenditures (excluding capital) for both town-wide and district-based services were 12 million dollars for the 2020 fiscal year including 4 million (35%) for highways and 4 million (35%) for general fund spending (including 6% for parks and recreation). About 30% of spending is for other special district services including fire and emergency services, water, lighting, drainage, etc. There are a total of 29 town special districts.

Sales taxes are the leading revenue source supporting town services accounting for approximately 50% of general and highway fund revenues. Property taxes play a more limited role in comparison with other town governments, accounting for only 16% of budgeted general fund revenues for 2020.

Initiative for Change

In 2009 the Town of Canandaigua wanted to explore options to improve planning services. The town engaged a consultant to examine alternatives. During this consultant project, the broader option of hiring a town manager or town manager/planner was introduced as an option by Jim Fralick, the interim town supervisor. The town manager option was mentioned in the consultant final report but was not among the four consultant options advanced in the report to improve planning services.

Over the period from 2009 – 2019 the Town of Canandaigua experienced substantial turnover in the town supervisor position. In Canandaigua the supervisor is elected for a four-year term. Between 2009-2019, five people have served in the office with one special election to fill a vacancy and two people being appointed to complete terms vacated by resignations during terms. For example, in 2016 Town Supervisor

Pam Helming left during her term as Supervisor after being elected as a State Senator. As a consequence, another board member was appointed to serve as the interim supervisor. The supervisor position in the town was traditionally considered more than part-time, and the degree of turnover in those holding the position led the governing board to ask questions about potential alternatives in town organization to ensure continuity of leadership and administrative progress in serving the community.

It is also important to note that these concerns about town organization emerged during a period of significant growth. The town population grew substantially along with the attendant local government demands for development planning, infrastructure investment, and other related activity. These trends led to the planning service consulting efforts and the report in 2009.

Moving Toward a Decision

In 2016 board members began to seriously examine creating the position of town manager to address the needs for continuity in leadership and administration in town government. Using the authority outlined in New York State Town Law Article 3-B Town Manager, the board drafted and introduced a local law outlining the duties of a town manager and other relevant changes needed to accommodate the new position.

The town board held several public hearings for citizen comment and discussion on the proposed law in February and early March of 2017. After the first hearing, the board drafted and distributed a public information flyer to address frequently asked questions about the law, its impact on the town board's authority,

the role of the town supervisor, and other matters of interest.¹

Later in March of 2017 the board adopted, without modifications, the proposed local law and began a search for a professional to fill the position. The board suspended their search and hired the then current director of development, Douglas Finch to fill the new position. Finch had been hired to serve as the director of development position in 2014 - created in response the consulting report's recommendations in 2009. The new town manager position included administrative oversight of town development operations and no new director of development was appointed. Mr. Finch is currently serving in the second year of a five-year appointment running through July 2025. The creation of this position was the first town manager position within Ontario County.

Expectations

Board leaders were expecting improved continuity of leadership, professional management, and improved public accountability from the change in town organization. The hope for improved professional management included expectations for improved efficiency (competitive assessment of regular contracts, etc.) and interdepartmental coordination.

Experience

Participating observers, both staff and governing board members, indicated that board members are better informed/prepared with options and information for decision-making. It was suggested that board members have a much clearer view of issues currently under consideration and ones that may be anticipated in the near future.

¹ The proposed and adopted local law preserved the town supervisor's option for selecting a budget officer and maintained the boards policy making

As hoped for there is evidence of improved administrative coordination and teamwork within and across departments. Also there is an apparent leveling of the playing field for departments and staff in financial assessments, reporting accountability, and open discussion of current problems.

Continuity has led to improvements in policy tools and practices, including enhanced town wide capital planning for sustained investment overtime, and relatedly enhanced town policy and practices for fixed asset management (adopted in early 2020).

In 2019 the town board wanted to assess the degree to which the administrative change achieved financial results. The town board conducted a fiscal review with staff support and documented savings of over \$400,000 per year that could be directly attributed to the initiatives, actions, and policies of creating the town manager position. These included health insurance cost avoidance, other annual insurance savings, accounting annual savings, staffing in the development director position, reduction of town supervisor to a part-time position, grant receipts, improvement in bond rating, avoided interest charges, and increased interest income.

Unexpected Benefits

Prior to the change to a town administrator, and partially related to the high degree of turnover in town supervisors, staff uncertainty was prevalent. Some town staff communicated that each election cycle brought with it concerns about job security and the potential for change in administrative direction from a new chief elected town supervisor. The creation and appointment of a town manager has created valuable stability and a sense of continuity of effort for town employees. This

authority. Subsequent to passage the administrator has always been chosen as the budget officer.

was an unanticipated benefit of the change in local organization.

The creation of the town manager position has increased intergovernmental cooperation between the town and the City of Canandaigua. The increased, stable administrative capacity has permitted the development and coordination of service sharing opportunities between the two municipalities. At the town manager's suggestion, the town board realigned its committee structure to parallel the city's easing board to board communication and work.

The town administrator has created other valuable benefits, including:

- The administrative capacity created by the town manager position has opened up additional opportunities for local service delivery cooperation with other nearby local governments.
- Increased transparency for citizens and staff including a more open discussion of the budget.
- Increased acquisition of grants for key projects and initiatives.
- Active development of a citizen implementation committee – an ongoing group for implementation of the comprehensive plan – which includes town board actions and activity in assessing implementation performance. This was an effort begun by a former town supervisor and brought to heightened use after creation of the town manager position.

Resources

The governing board, with advice of the town attorney, consulted with the New York State Association of Towns for guidance. The Association council directed local leaders to the existing state statute as guidance for the creation of a town manager position.

The town also reviewed the International County/City Management Association (ICMA)-National Civic League [recommended charter](#) as a starting point in drafting a local law. Both of these resources were used in tailoring a local law to meet the preferences and needs of the Town of Canandaigua.

In addition, the nearby example of the City of Canandaigua operating with a local government manager provided insight about how this change in form of organization might work for the town.

Summary Insights

1. **Leadership and Continuity.** Change was initiated by the governing board out of a concern for consistency and professionalism in town leadership following a period of rapid turnover in town leadership.
2. **Straightforward Process.** The process was not protracted, or difficult; elected leaders used available resources to draft a local law and followed normal local law process for review and adoption of change in organization.
3. **Value of Communication.** Open communication efforts with staff and citizens about the proposed change appeared to strengthen community support for final board action. Part of this effort was the creation and distribution of FAQs in print and on social media.
4. **Realized Expectations.** Board expectations for (1) improved administration, (2) board policy process, (3) organizational tools, and (4) cost savings and improved fiscal condition were met by the first years of change in local organization.
5. **Unanticipated Benefits.** In addition, there were unanticipated benefits in the areas of: (1) administrative continuity and stability for department leaders and staff, (2) increased administrative consistency and fairness, (3) intergovernmental service

sharing, (4) increased grant acquisitions, and (5) increased transparency for citizens and staff.

6. **Assessing Outcomes.** The Town of Canandaigua governing board took the valuable step of assessing the outcome or impact of the organizational change. In

particular, they worked with staff to assess cost savings associated with the new town administrator after the first two years of implementation.

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Chapter 69

TOWN MANAGER

GENERAL REFERENCES

Residency requirements for Town
Manager — See Ch. 60, Art. III.

§ 69-1. Title.

This chapter shall be known as "Town Manager" of the Town of Canandaigua, New York.

§ 69-2. Purpose; position established.

The Town Board, in accordance with § 58 of the Town Law of the State of New York, hereby establishes the position of Town Manager. The purpose is to provide the most economical and effective overall direction, coordination and control of the day-to-day activities and operation of the Town of Canandaigua.

§ 69-3. Appointment; term of office.

Said position shall be filled by appointment by the Town of Canandaigua Town Board by a majority vote of the voting strength of said Board. Said Town Manager shall serve at the pleasure of the Town Board.

§ 69-4. Removal.

The Town Board may remove the Town Manager at any time by a majority vote of its members. If requested, a public hearing shall be granted by the Town Board within 30 days following notice of removal. During the interim, the Town Board may suspend the Manager from duty, but shall continue the Manager's salary and, if the removal becomes final, shall pay said salary in accordance with any employment agreements, if applicable.

§ 69-5. Powers and duties.

The Town Manager of the Town of Canandaigua, New York, shall be the chief administrative officer of the Town and shall have the following powers and duties:

- A. Serve in a confidential and policy advisory position to the Town Board in connection with all Town business and affairs.
- B. Research and provide to the Town Board such materials and information, including reports, as may be necessary to provide the Board with information upon which it can make decisions.

- A. Oversee and implement the Town's personnel policies in a fair and equitable fashion in accordance with applicable laws and regulations. Appoint or suspend or remove all Town-appointed employees only after first receiving direction by the Town Board.
- B. Assist the Town Board in identifying its financial, personnel and material needs and problems.
- C. Undertake studies of Town needs and operations and make recommendations to the Board concerning the same.
- D. Conduct a continuing study of all functions and activities of the Town for purposes of devising ways and means of obtaining greater efficiency and economy.
- E. From time to time, make recommendations to the Town Board as to measures or programs which will improve the efficiency or economy of the Town government.
- F. Serve as a liaison to the Town's financial advisors.
- G. Keep abreast of available grants-in-aid from the other levels of government, pursue such revenue sources and make and follow through on all grant and aid applications and inquiries.
- H. Supervise the purchase of services, materials, supplies, equipment and letting of contracts.
- I. See that all inquiries by residents of the Town or other interested persons are referred to the appropriate Town official or department head for investigation or response.
- J. Coordinate communication from the Town to the public, updates to the Town's website and the issuance of media/press statements and written communications to the public.
- K. Attend the meetings of the Town Board, as needed, and assist in the preparation of the agenda of such meetings.
- L. Attend all regular and special Board meetings and participate in the same.
- M. Consult with and assist the Town Attorney in the preparation of any resolutions, ordinances or local laws requiring his or her services.
- N. Prepare suggested or recommended resolutions for Town Board action.
- O. Make preliminary review of budget requests and make recommendations concerning them to the Town Board. The Manager may be appointed the Town Budget Officer by the Town Supervisor in accordance with New York State Town Law § 103, Subdivision 2.
- P. Preliminarily review for Town Board action all invoices received by the Town.

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TOWN MANAGER

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- A. Assist the Town Board in all billings and collections to the extent allowed by law.
- B. Make continuing review and reports to the Town Board of all existing and proposed capital projects.
- C. Make organizational studies using such techniques as work distribution, workflow charting, task analysis, random sampling, work measurement studies, statistical analysis and system analysis.
- D. Evaluate the effectiveness of operating programs in achieving organization objectives.
- E. Make recommendations to develop and maintain sound organization structures, to improve management methods and procedures and to the effective use of manpower, money and materials.
- F. Develop liaison and cooperative arrangements with other governmental bodies, with regional organizations, with local institutions and with private organizations; attend meetings of the Town Zoning Board of Appeals and Town Planning Board meetings as he may choose or as requested by the Town Board; and report pertinent matters to the Town Board.
- G. Prepare for approval of the Town Board and other Town agencies informational releases of significant action as well as other communications to Town residents, the public or other public agencies where and when directed to by the Town Board.
- H. Perform such other powers and duties as may be prescribed, modified or revoked from time to time by the Town Board by resolution.

§ 69-6. Filling of vacancies.

Any vacancy in the office of the Town Manager shall be filled within 60 days after the effective date of such vacancy by the Town Board.

§ 69-7. Salary and expenses.

The Town Manager is an employee of the Town and shall be compensated by an annual salary as set by the Town Board and participation in health and dental benefits. All expenses incidental to the Town Manager's duties that are not prepaid by the Town shall be reimbursed.