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A Long Time Coming: North Castle Town Administrator

The Case Study Series

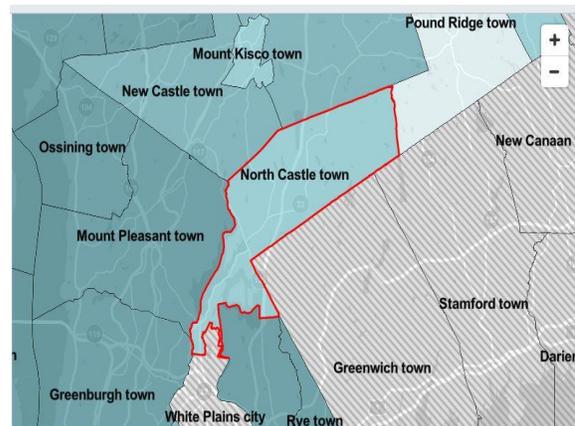
This review of change in governance and administration in the Town of North Castle, New York is one in a series of communities in New York that took initiative to change the administration of their local government. These local initiatives were reviewed and summarized in 2020-21 by the Public Management 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.

North Castle Community and Region

The Town of North Castle has a population of approximately 12,000 and comprises almost 26 square miles in the center of Westchester County. Westchester County has a population of approximately one million residents. North Castle is located thirty-five miles north of New York City. North Castle is in the top quartile of New York's 932 towns by total population size and represents approximately 1.26% of Westchester's population. The Town was erected in 1736, date of the first town government, and incorporated on March 7, 1788, and is comprised of three hamlets: North

White Plains, Armonk and Banksville. North White Plains is the oldest and most urban hamlet and has the most concentrated population in the Town. Per the 2010 Census, the population was 2,168. North White Plains borders the City of White Plains and is home to Metro North's North White Plains Train Station which serves North Castle residents. Armonk is the middle hamlet and home to the Town Hall and Town Offices. Armonk has a business district with cafes, shops and professional offices and is also home to big corporations such as the IBM world headquarters. Armonk's population was 4,777 in 2010. The Hamlet of Banksville is a predominantly a low-density residential area.

Map of North Castle



Town Service and Financial Profile

North Castle provides a relatively full complement of municipal services to town residents. The town has approximately 103 full

time equivalent employees including administrative personnel to support service delivery. Town provided services include:

- A full-service New York State accredited police department with 24-hour coverage, bike patrols, and other services;
- Residential and commercial refuse and recycling collection, large item pickup, and a variety of related service (services provided by a private contractor);
- Highway services;
- Public water and sewer services are provided on a district basis in needed higher density areas;
- Parks and recreation services;
- Planning and code enforcement services; and
- Public library services;

Fire services and emergency services are provided through a cluster of local independent fire companies and districts, including the Armonk Independent Fire Company (North Castle Fire District #2), the Banksville Independent Fire Company, and the North Castle South Fire District No. 1.

The town-wide budgeted spending was approximately 30 million for fiscal year 2020. District-based service needs for fire protection, ambulance, lighting sewer, water and other purposes involved an additional 5.6 million in local budgeted spending. Local services were supported by local property taxes (72%) and sales taxes (6%) with the balance coming from a variety of other sources including user fees, fines, and interest income. General debt service fund obligations declined to near zero in the pre-Covid-19 pandemic period. The more targeted water and sewer district-based debt service was limited and stable over the last 5 years (2016-2020).

Initiative for Change

The town had experienced a long period of stable elected leadership with a Town Supervisor who had served for over 40 years. The position had morphed into a full-time elected position overseeing all town administration and service provisions during this tenure. The long serving supervisor was defeated for re-election in 2005 and was replaced by another member of the town board. The new Town Supervisor, Reese Berman, took office in 2006 and was immersed in the full leadership demands of local governance, administration, and service delivery.

Berman began attending the county-wide municipal officials group, the Westchester Municipal Officials Association, which included participation by both elected leaders and appointed local government administrators. This involvement led to a growing respect for the knowledge and administrative skills of municipal administrators in the local area as she began to seek their advice for local policy, problem solving, and decision-making.

Berman discussed the value of working with nearby municipal administrators with the town board. During her second term in office, Berman initiated a series of work sessions about this topic in the spring and summer of 2008 to consider the option of a full-time municipal administrator. These sessions included Q&A opportunities with nearby town administrators and managers.

After these working sessions, board sentiments were mixed on the potential creation of an administrator position for the town. Some members affirmed that the significant demands of the Town Supervisor position could limit the potential pool of candidates to run for the position and required change to a full-time administrator for the town to operate efficiently and professionally. Others questioned the creation of the new position based on cost and the potential for an

administrative layer between citizens and elected board members.

Moving Toward a Decision

In September of 2008, the town board appointed a bi-partisan Administrator Review Task Force with seven town citizen members to “study the position of Town Administrator to determine if it would provide a better and more efficient governance for the Town of North Castle.” The resolution also directed the Task Force to prepare a report for the town board with recommendations to include the anticipated cost of a Town Administrator and how to finance it. The task force was asked to report back by March of 2009.

The task force report in March of 2009 contained a unanimous recommendation to “hire a Town Administrator as soon as possible.” The report listed specific tasks that could be assigned to a new administrator. The report indicated that the change would provide for professional continuity and stability for town administration, unburden board members from administrative oversight, and increase focus on policy while expanding the potential residents that could take on the responsibilities of Town Supervisor. Copies of the report were made available to the public on the town website and in the town office.

The response to the report by current board members was mixed. Supervisor Berman indicated that given the unanimous recommendation of the Task Force to act as soon as possible, the board would move expeditiously to draft a law to provide for a Town Administrator, schedule a public hearing, and vote on the proposal.

The town board reviewed and discussed the Task Force recommendations in the spring and summer of 2009. Strategies to pay for new position were considered, including reducing town board and Town Supervisor salaries.

Citizens attended board meetings and expressed mixed opinions about the creation of a new town administrator position. Over the summer, as budget realities for 2009 began to emerge, board members expressed their concern about the timing of creating a new administrator position in the midst of a fiscal downturn with a projected revenue shortfall and staff furloughs being considered.

In the fall of 2009, during the town board election season, the board created the position of Town Administrator by resolution but did not fund the position in the 2010 budget nor initiate a search for the new position. The board did not consider creation of a local law that articulated board responsibilities to be delegated to the new position, nor did the board reference existing state law provisions on the creation of a Town Manager - Town Law, §58-a - by local law. Board discussions do not indicate why this more limited remedy was chosen, nor is there evidence in town board minutes of consideration of other options with the advice of legal counsel.

The position was left dormant following the change in elected board leadership in 2010. In 2011 the board budget and finance committee asked for a Task Force to review “the advisability of hiring a town administrator.” The task force issued a report in the fall of 2011 that concurred with the earlier Task Force Report in 2009 on the need for a full-time senior executive with strong financial management credentials. However, they did not support independent and untethered authority over the day-to-day activities but rather a relationship that would “perform and report to” the Town Supervisor on a day-to-day basis.”

In June of 2012 the board ratified the resolution establishing the position description approved in 2009 and then appointed a committee to conduct a search for the position and review

the position description. The search committee's candidate selection was not embraced by the Town Board. Town Board leadership proceeded to unanimously appoint another candidate for Town Administrator and adopt a position description in August of 2012. A fifty percent reduction in the Town Supervisor's salary was a part of the adjustments made to prepare for the new position.

In this final step there was discussion of creating a manager position with relatively full administrative authority, but the finance committee task force recommended, and the board implemented an approach that maintained, a fuller level of control by the governing board. The board/supervisor versus administrator role was not clarified and remains somewhat unclear.

During the process there was involvement by citizens and community groups as well as coverage by the local press. Citizens voiced both support and opposition to the creation of a town administrator position. The local press covered the development in news articles but did not provide editorial comment.

The first appointee served from 2012 until 2018, with a minor break in employment. An interim appointment was made in the fall of 2018. The current Town Administrator began his service to the town July of 2019.

Expectations

The North Castle process of creating a Town Administrator position traversed the terms of three separate town leaders and a number of different town governing board members. The expected benefits of the new position by proponents remained relatively constant over the period and included:

Improved organizational management. Town government organization and service delivery has grown, and the county and state government environments are more complex. This organizational change requires a full-time

professional administrator to provide organizational direction and coordination and regular departmental oversight. Other key elements of this need included improved financial management and effective management of human resources including labor relations and negotiations.

Continuity and Stability. The presence of a town administrator would provide continuity of and stability for service provision and administration with changing governing board members over time.

Efficiency. Some elected leaders articulated that a professional town administrator would improve the organization's ability to effectively serve citizens and improve the efficiency of the governing board's work and other town boards and commissions. Some local leaders believed that in the medium and long-term, the town administrator position would lead to more cost-efficient government in the town through increased intergovernmental service delivery and other cost saving changes.

Expand Governing Board Leadership. A number of board members expressed the belief that a town administrator would expand the pool of people willing to run for Town Supervisor. More people with other full-time obligations would consider the position a reasonable or tenable avenue of public service.

Experience

During the ten years since the first town administrator was appointed several of the expected benefits have been realized. For example, in the initial period under a town manager, a labor negotiation was resolved that the board with existing advice and advisors had experienced difficulty gaining closure.

The town administrator position in North Castle, while evolving over time, has improved town operations and the focus of the governing board on policy and board relations with department leadership. For example, the policy manual was improved and updated providing

greater clarity for board and staff participants. A number of those interviewed noted that the administrator's office is respected by both the staff and the board. The administrator's initiative to institute regular department head meetings has improved coordination and communication across departments and service areas. Town staff and board members indicated that the town administrator provides a day-to-day leader for department heads to turn to for needed guidance and clarification.

The current occupant of the Town Supervisor position is cited as evidence that creating the administrator position has opened up the pool of citizens who can and will serve in the more limited Town Supervisor role. The incumbent works full time as a mid-career professional in the financial sector and was willing to run for Town Supervisor after the creation of the administrator position.

Resources

The transition to a town administrator in North Castle benefitted from several local resources. The newly elected supervisor's participation in the Westchester Municipal Officials Association (WMOA) proved to be a catalytic resource that provided real time examples of how municipal managers team with chief elected officials to serve local communities. All cities and villages and several towns in the WMOA have some form of manager/administrator organization. Three years of participation, observation and seeking advice from local managers/administrators provided the former North Castle Town Supervisor with substantial evidence of the benefits of this organizational option.

These organizational contacts provided a venue for the Town Supervisor to develop key relationships with several municipal managers that served as resources for Town of North Castle officials as they began to do their own internal assessment of the manager/administrator option.

Summary Insights

1. **Unanticipated Events.** Initiatives to examine change in the organization of local government can have unexpected turns. This case demonstrates at least two: (1) an unexpected downturn in the economy and (2) changes in local elected leadership. The downturn in the local economy led to an erosion of support for creating an administrator position. Creating such a position during the consideration of potential layoffs was hard for some governing board members to embrace and led to the creation of new administrator position while deferring filling the position. New elected leadership that opposed the creation of the position left it vacant through a full two-year term.
2. **Consider Timing and Communications.** Future events cannot be predicted but it is wise to carefully assess what is on the horizon and proceed cautiously with good internal and public communication. Carefully structuring the plan for funding support for a new position can be important in tight budget circumstances. Even without an economic downturn, it is valuable to assess a proposed change with timing that can avoid it unnecessarily becoming a campaign issue.
3. **Expectations and Outcomes.** The expected outcomes of improved and more efficient administration and a broader pool of willing local leaders appears to have been realized.
4. **Peer Examples.** This case demonstrates the value of having nearby, observable examples of how a potential organizational change benefits another comparable organization.
5. **Existing Legal Authority.** The North Castle Town Board did not consider enacting a local law that articulated the board responsibilities to be delegated to the new

position, nor did the board reference existing state law provisions on the creation of a Town Manager - Town Law, §58-a in creating the administrator position. Our interviews indicate that explicitly

considering this delegation as a board and clarifying the roles of board members and the Town Supervisor's office through a local law under this provision could be a valuable step.

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