

## LOOKING TO SHERMAN

### **Small Town Government, Part II: How Our Sausage Is Made (and Who Makes It): A Brief-As-Possible History of Sherman Politics**

Given today's divisive political climate, it's understandable that Democrats and Independents are experiencing epic levels of apathy if not downright disgust. We hope that shedding some light on how our town works will prove to educate readers about how to best support those hardy souls who are putting themselves up for election in various town positions this coming November.

#### ***The Evolution of Power***

In our last newsletter, we gave a general overview of CT small-town government, identifying Sherman as a "statutory" rather than charter town. This means simply that Sherman abides by state laws governing municipalities, as put forth in the General Statutes of Connecticut. (Charter towns also follow the Statutes, but have adopted different combinations of government positions with varying functions, including mayors, town managers, etc.) The Statutes are created and amended by the General Assembly, Connecticut's legislative body, and the ones we're concerned with here are mainly found in Title 7, "Municipalities," and Title 9, "Elections" – you can read them at [cga.ct.gov/current/pub/titles.htm](http://cga.ct.gov/current/pub/titles.htm) Connecticut Council of Small Towns (CT-COST) offers a condensed version of these titles for some light bed-time reading at [ctcost.org](http://ctcost.org).

The basic blueprint that Sherman and other statutory towns follow is the Town Meeting-Selectmen form. At annual Town Meetings, residents vote on the main concerns of the town, such as the town budget, capital expenditures, and creation or amendment of ordinances (the town equivalent of statutes). Special meetings may be held as issues requiring referendums arise throughout the year.

The Board of Selectmen are the implementers and administrators of these policies. CT-COST explains, "'From the beginning, the selectmen exercised the general power to superintend the concerns of the town. Originally, they only implemented the decisions of the frequent town meetings, which were held to decide nearly every detail of town business. As town meetings became more formal and were held at less frequent intervals, the selectmen acquired more discretionary power.'

This increase in the discretionary power of the selectmen occurred most significantly in 1979, when the Connecticut Statutes designated the First Selectmen as Chief Elected Official (CEO) of the town. Intended as an efficiency measure to deal with growing small-town populations as they developed more complex needs that needed to be addressed more frequently, this statute established the First Selectman as the point-person

for implementing town policy. It also bestowed other “duties and powers” on the First Selectman that are largely those of a figurehead, such as the Chief of Police title which means the First Selectman can direct the work of the Resident State Trooper (really more of a request than an order). Or, on rare occasions, the First Selectman may be asked to sign a special gun permit. The First Selectman can also sign off on raffle applications. Virtually all of these functions are simply an endorsement to the State, where the real control lies.

With these nominal extensions of the First Selectman’s duties, the BOS remained the executive branch of town government, with the Selectmen having co-equal power. The BOS still determined the policies that the First Selectman is charged with implementing.

However (and this is where government structure offered the biggest loophole for the First Selectman to accrue personal power), the First Selectman could for the most part control the agendas of the BOS meetings. Unless the Selectmen agreed that an item be added to that agenda, what was discussed and voted upon was dependent on the First Selectman. Also, the First Selectman was allowed to caucus (meet with) members of the same party in the absence of other BOS members, and could therefore discuss issues ahead of time and make decisions outside of the public view. Then, what would come to the BOS meetings could be already determined in terms of outcome.

### ***The Personality Factor***

Depending on the personal character of the First Selectman, and whether that person was inclined to be fair, inclusive and transparent, Sherman was vulnerable to becoming a hotbed of longstanding personal/political feuds. And, the incubator was already a hot, closed system: Sherman’s original makeup as small, white, rural and Republican in a predominately “blue” state had created a longstanding tradition of cheerfully ignoring state laws when it suited.

With this combination—more power vested in the board of selectmen, particularly in the First Selectman; plus Sherman’s habit of flying under the state radar—much came to depend on the Sherman’s First Selectman’s personality as far as how town governance was conducted. When Sherman was only about 1000 people strong (the population in 1960 was 825, gradually increasing to 1459 residents in 1970), this freewheeling, personality-driven approach worked just fine, especially when the personality happened to be someone like Kenneth Grant, who served as First Selectman for 32 years in 16 consecutive terms (1963-1992).

As Andrea O’Connor (Sherman’s First Selectman from 2005-2012) relates, “Kenny was a ‘benevolent caretaker’ as First Selectman...he was beloved by just about everyone.” Grant would conduct casual board of selectman meetings characterized by lots of cross-talk from a minimally-attended audience; personally plow out a snowbound resident as readily as any other of his duties as First Selectman; and

generally took a laissez-faire approach to managing the town. His approach matched the staid outlooks and independent nature of Sherman's old farming families.

Grant died of esophageal cancer in 1992. It was soon clear that not only was his personality the glue that had kept the town peaceful and stable over the years, but that the population boom in the late 90's might have challenged even him. Over five years, from 1993 to 1998, the population increased from 2,200 to 3,000. Personality alone could no longer hold sway to balance the proliferating needs of the growing town—not even a large, warmhearted, universally popular personality.

The two terms following Grant's death, with Anthony "Hap" Hapanowich as First Selectmen, were by all accounts chaotic and argumentative. In a 1998 New York Times article titled "In Sherman, Is It Politics or Personalities?" Elizabeth Baker reported on the unprecedented win of Sherman's first Democrat, and first female, First Selectman, Donna Tuck, who succeeded Hapanowich. Tuck won 588-552 against Hapanowich, who then became selectman along with his Republican running mate, Michael Crawford. When asked what she thought was the reason for her win, she replied that Hapanowich had not been able to maintain the congenial atmosphere of the town government. "It was embattled," she said. "The members of the board of selectmen weren't getting along with each other, and the audience wasn't getting along with the board...I thought I could bring some friendliness back to Town Hall."

Tuck ascribed the discordant atmosphere, and Hapanowich's loss, to Hapanowich's personality; Hapanowich blamed his loss on the Democrats, saying, "They used every tactic imaginable to get me out of office...it was the Democrats coming out and giving me all kinds of grief over nothing that made it embattled."

During Tuck's four-year stint (1997-2000), she dealt with the rancor by getting strict on the rules and processes handed down from the state, starting with meeting protocols. A Connecticut statute (unique to Connecticut among New England States) held that items not previously warned on a meeting's agenda could not be discussed at that meeting, unless by a 2/3 vote. This statute had never been observed before, but Tuck thought it necessary to keep meetings orderly and on track with town business. Republicans on the board of selectman and the audience were outraged. (For more details on this turning point in Sherman's political history, link to the whole article at: [nytimes.com/1998/03/01/nyregion/in-sherman-is-it-politics-or-personalities.html](http://nytimes.com/1998/03/01/nyregion/in-sherman-is-it-politics-or-personalities.html).)

Meanwhile, let's not forget the population boom. Tuck was tasked with the necessary expansion of the school, requiring probably the biggest expenditure of Sherman to date. "They were having classes in closets," she pointed out. Navigating this and other financial requirements of a growing town frayed relationships even more, as fiscally conservative Republicans were reflexively horrified by spending. Tuck had not been able to return friendliness to Town Hall; quite the opposite.

By the time another Democrat came in as First Selectman in 2005, personal rancor had hardened into mutual antipathy along party lines. And First Selectman Andrea O'Connor, as a nurse, lawyer, college professor and bulldog disguised as a petite, soft-spoken woman, did not waste too much energy trying to jolly Sherman's government back into being one big happy family, even though she'd been inspired to run by observing the public incivility of her one-term predecessor, Art Von Plachecki.

During O'Connor's tenure, she and the BOS focused on controlling the growth of the town's population, bringing town services up to a level appropriate to the existing numbers of residents, maintaining a high quality of life for town residents, and accomplishing this all while being fiscally prudent and conservative. While the Planning and Zoning Commission's decision to increase lot size in Zones A and B was a major force in controlling growth, the decision to actively protect remaining open space acted as a complementary effort to achieve this goal. O'Connor aggressively competed for State funding to support projects to better meet the needs of residents, including grants to restore and renovate Old Town Hall as a functioning senior center and building the pavilion at the Town Park. Voters approved major bonding for town projects, including repaving critical roads, replacing bridges, expanding both the library and the firehouse, as well as the purchase of open space. Annual budgets were kept flat or at a minimal increase while services, particularly in the critical area of social services, increased. Most importantly, unlike the current administration, O'Connor welcomed public debate and answered the public's questions, offering a totally transparent view local governing processes.

### ***The Need For Clarity***

As a measure to establish fair and correct practices and transparency as she dealt with both the management of the town and the political undercurrents, O'Connor created two written guides that conformed to the Connecticut statutes as they applied to Sherman: a personnel policies manual and a manual collecting the policy decisions of the Board of Selectmen. Even though she was defeated by Clay Cope as she sought her 5<sup>th</sup> term, during which she hoped to consolidate and stabilize Sherman after its growth spurt, she provided these manuals to the new administration as valuable guides to best practices.

These guides are presently nowhere to be found in Town Hall. Residents wondering about how, for instance, the School Board has come to include just one registered Democrat, have to do a deep dig on their own to find out Sherman voted in 1984 to adopt Title 9-204a of the General Statutes "authorizing the nomination of any political party of candidates for election as members of the Board of Education of such town equal to the number of members of such board to be elected as such election and authorize the electors of such town to vote for the full number of such members to be elected." This law can be found in the one resource that is available to Sherman residents, the manual of "Ordinances, Special Acts and Resolutions" which can be purchased at Town Hall.

Like most of the rest of the manual, the statement is so full of jargon as to be practically incomprehensible (which is why O'Connor's guides are so sorely needed), but the upshot is that the School Board does require representation by the minority party. However, we return to the endemic problem: imbalance and partisanship has been allowed to creep in in the absence of a fair, inclusive and transparent attitude on the part of the administration.

At the same time, the slippery stacking of town boards and commissions is not entirely the fault of the hard-to-understand or hard-to-locate CT statutes, or of Republicans taking advantage of the policy void. In 2004, the Sherman Democratic Town Committee, knowing that there were insufficient enrolled Democrats to fill seats and win elections and recognizing that many issues that are important to the town are not in fact partisan issues, decided to embrace Independents—people who we recognized were inclined to vote Democratic but who were reluctant to declare a party in a town where history had been hostile to Democrats. Occasionally, Independents' elections or appointments as Democrats eventually do not, in fact, turn out to reflect Democratic values.

Illegal? No. But the appointments that have been pushed through, or blocked, to various boards and commissions in the past couple years, have been part of a deliberate effort to promote Republican agendas and squash dissent from Democratic voices. (One of these bogus appointments and its disturbing outcome, of George Linkletter to the Candlewood Lake Authority, was delved into in the June issue of this newsletter.)

(As an important side note, welcoming Independents to run on the Democratic Town Slate has established us as the party of inclusiveness in Sherman...very much in keeping with our values as a party.)

As we go forward, we will look specifically into the timeframes and propriety with which other appointments have been made by First Selectman Cope. It would be nice if clear, transparent procedures referring to how appointments are made, and how these rules apply to different boards and commissions, were readily available at Town Hall. In their absence, however, the current First Selectman has assumed more power than he actually has and, because no one has challenged his actions, he continues to grab and exercise more power than he should. Additionally, Cope's refusal to answer questions in public denies the public of the right to information. While the BOS meetings are intended to provide the Selectmen with an opportunity to discuss and vote on issues, Sherman has a long tradition of allowing the public to raise questions and for all to hear the answers. Cope has turned his back on this tradition, further obscuring the workings of government.

And here's what happens as a resident, lacking transparent, available government, if you go in to inquire from the Town Clerk how to apply for a volunteer position on a board, find out what positions are open, which are elected and which are appointed,

etc. First, you will be looked at as though you have three heads if you ask for a manual of town policy. Then, you will be told to “go down the hall and ask Clay...we’re always looking for people!” Finally, you will be shown a manila envelope of vacancies that have recently been filled by Clay Cope, stapled to the section of the Connecticut Statutes referring to the particular board or commission. This last is not handed to you but rather waved quickly in front of your face. You will not even be told about the manual of “Ordinances, Special Acts and Resolutions.”

It is a discouraging experience, and part of the cloud that now hangs over the Democratic party and Sherman as a whole. With partisan politics so dominant, and the clarity of policy that Tuck and O’Connor tried to bring deliberately erased, upcoming Democratic candidates and those who support them need to insist on fair, clear, transparent practices as far as our town governance. At this juncture, we as Democrats, in Sherman and across the nation, need to become the better-informed party who are inspired and empowered by understanding the history, laws and rules of government...starting with our own local sausage-making.