

How Our Town Government Works and Doesn't Work

There was a great display of pride at the September 28 Town Meeting: pride in how well the town is managed and how well the town's government works.

Pride is a wonderful thing. But only when it is earned. There is much to be proud of in North Haven, but there are also many things we should be embarrassed about. Most of all how, like ostriches, most of us stick our heads in the sand.

The most important law in North Haven is our Charter, and although all the other Town Meeting towns our size in Connecticut have taken a fresh look at their Charters in the last five years, it has been 26 years in North Haven. The Charter is out of date and inappropriate for our town.

How does this affect us materially since, to be honest, that is what we care about most? The Charter's competitive bid policy is vague enough that the Board of Education interprets it differently than does the First Selectman (and even the Board of Education recently changed its mind). This has probably cost taxpayers millions of dollars. We'll never know how much, and no one will take responsibility. All we get are denials, face-saving misrepresentations, and mature recommendations to put that all behind us and move on.

Another aspect of our Charter that costs us a great deal is our form of government. Effectively, we have no body that is responsible for oversight of the town's executive branch. You might think the Board of Finance does this, but just last week they decided not to even take a look at competitive bidding.

Why is North Haven so unAmerican as to have no checks or balances? Because our form of government predates the founding of the United States. It is meant for very small towns, where everyone knows everyone else's business.

How does our government work, compared with having a Council and a professional Town Manager, the way most American towns our size do? We can see the difference right here in North Haven. Even before it became a big story that neither the town nor the schools were bidding out their jobs, the Superintendent of Schools – a nonpartisan professional, like a Town Manager – had already been working toward the goal of competitive bidding. However, the First Selectman, who is personally responsible for town contracts, stuck to his partisan guns, saying that not bidding out a sixteen-year-old contract is okay.

The town's management, by someone with no management education or experience, is not handled professionally. When financial issues are raised, town

officials talk about the awards they get for their financial reports. But the award-giving organizations do not take into account whether it is made public that the Director of Finance played with budget numbers so that 37 items fell one dollar short of the \$20,000 requirement for Town Meeting approval. And the award-giving organizations also do not look at town competitive bidding laws.

We can be proud of our excellent garbage and recycling service, our pool, and our new library, but we cannot be proud of the way the town's administration punished residents for voting against a budget by cutting days out of our use of each of these. Nor can we be proud of the way the town's administration punished residents for phasing in revaluation (a possibility the administration hid from the public) by asking for an additional appropriation of up to \$85,000 for unbid consulting, software, and hardware they would have purchased anyway.

Why doesn't North Haven take a new look at its outdated Charter? Because it benefits the town administration, even if it does not benefit town residents. And why should the administration care about town residents, when town residents don't care enough to show up at Town Meetings? When town residents are happy to let town officials and employees run the town's legislative body, too? They're looking out for number one. Why aren't we?