

Town of North Attleborough

Citizen Focus Group Report

Government Trailblazer Program
Center on Government Performance
National Center for Civic Innovation

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Executive Summary

The focus group opened with a general discussion of living in North Attleborough. Focus group respondents rated the quality of life in the community as high. They commented that their experience with town department staff has been good, with people finding the employees to be courteous and knowledgeable, generally. There was a different perspective on volunteer boards and committees where a fair amount of problems were highlighted, such as complaints of incompetence and lack of knowledge about issues. Alternatively, representatives voiced concern that residents under-appreciate volunteer boards.

According to various focus group subjects, the Representative Town Meeting (RTM) process can be improved by providing timely, simplified and concise information about issues that come before them. They would like more coordination between RTM and selectpersons and other boards and training on the RTM process.

The expansion of online services utilizing the town website would provide a solution to the RTM information issue above as well as provide more information to citizens. Relying upon best practices used in comparable communities, suggestions for increased online bill paying, discussion of issues on the town website, posting of town documents and information sources were mentioned throughout the focus group.

Government transparency in general was commented on during this session. RTM respondents want access to more information before they vote on issues and believe that concise summaries of key issues will enhance their decision making.

When discussing town services, there was a high degree of satisfaction with what the town provides. Participants specifically highlighted the Planning Department, Parks and Recreation, the town library, the food pantry and veteran's services offices as delivering services well yet often undervalued by townspeople.

One deep concern for the focus group members was the need to improve citizen involvement in government. There is a high level of apathy with voting in town elections and difficulty getting residents to participate on town boards and committees. There is often turnover on volunteer boards. It is possible that increased information flow to residents may help with levels of participation, especially if they can get their information online.

Long term concerns include continued fiscal sustainability and responsibility. Focus group subject recognized that the town of North Attleborough must continue to take a conservative posture with funding in the near term. Along with that idea is the need for a multi-year economic development strategy that can balance commercial and residential tax bases. The quest for innovative funding mechanisms for the schools and other services should be part of that strategy.

Town of North Attleborough

Government Trailblazer Program

Town of North Attleborough, Massachusetts received a grant as part of the National Center for Civic Innovation, Government Trailblazer Program. The purpose of this Trailblazer Program is to determine the public's perspective and needs relative to local government services. This program is an effort to encourage and support government management practices that inform and are informed by the public. Information derived from focus group research can lead to the redesign of government programs and practices resulting in improved government performance.

This Government Trailblazer Program provides a way to assess government services and other areas of government performance. This is an opportunity for town officials to listen to the public with an open mind without any preconceived notions about services. This program is funded through support from the Alfred P. Sloan Foundation and other sources.

Planning Phase

The Town of North Attleborough was awarded this grant in 2010 and subsequently conducted a search for consulting organizations to assist with this program. PMR was selected to plan and conduct the focus group as facilitator.

The town's program coordinator for this grant attended a national conference sponsored by the National Center for Civic Innovation as preparation for this award in order to learn best practices regarding soliciting input from the public. During that session, the coordinator was encouraged to use a focus group method to gain the public's perspective on government services.

PMR met with North Attleborough public officials on several occasions to clearly identify their objectives and end-products for this project. To effectively gauge community input regarding municipal government performance, the facilitators wanted to be clear on project outcomes such as the focus group interview schedule, selection methods for participants, focus group logistics and dissemination methods for final reports.

Conducting the Focus Group

To ensure that participants would be comfortable responding to questions honestly and openly, subject confidentiality was crucial. The facilitator explained that their answers would be confidential and individuals will not be identified specifically in any reports and presentations that resulted from this focus group. At the same time, in order to accurately capture citizen feedback, the town arranged to have their local access cable outlet video and audio record the session for data capture purposes only. The town

Manager assured Representative Town Meeting members that the media files would only be used to accurately record the focus group responses.

Audio-video records will be retained for a minimum of 1 year after the final report is accepted by the town of North Attleborough. The records and field notes will be secured stored by the facilitator at its office. The audio-video recordings will be destroyed at the end of that period to protect the confidentiality of the participants.

The Focus Group Sample

In consultation with the facilitators, North Attleborough officials chose to focus on a sample of their Representative Town Meeting delegates.

<INSERT SAMPLE DESIGN HERE>

How many RTM are there???

How was sample drawn?

The original focus group design called for two focus groups of 6 to 10 people but due to the initial lack of response from citizens over the first few weeks of solicitation of participants, it was decided to hold one focus group session for the 13 RTM members that volunteered.

Thirteen Representative Town Meeting members, ten male and three females attended the focus group held in February, 2011. Most of the participants were long time community residents, eight of which had lived in town over 30 years. All participants illustrated a deep commitment to the town during their time at the focus group.

The facilitator used a semi-structured interview protocol including open-ended questions to elicit group participation and discussion on specific topic areas. This interview schedule was used as a guide for topics that reflected on government department performance in North Attleborough. Every effort was made to keep the focus group on track but to keep the facilitator nondirective, supportive, and non-evaluative to participant responses.

Analysis

Content analysis will be used to evaluate the information gathered during the focus group. This analysis was based on recall, notes taken by the co-facilitator, and audio-video transcripts from focus group recordings. The facilitator reviewed the focus group notes, examined key words in the notes and audio tapes and categorized responses according to major themes.

Introductory Questions

Quality of Life

Representative Town Meeting (RTM) participants generally had positive comments on the quality of life in North Attleborough, praising the school system, the vibrancy and diversity of activities in the community as well as the people who live here. They described it as a “well run, good town” and many remarked that what they liked best about the town were the people in the community. There was some commentary about the diverse quality of North Attleborough. One participant stated that “You have the conveniences of a city and you’re in a town.”

Several commented that they had moved away for work, military service etc but had moved back because the Town of North Attleborough was a desirable place to live. They described North Attleborough as a “Place where I want to raise my family” and “Watched my children thrive in schools.” Focus group contributors had few critical comments about life in the community.

Citizen Contact with Town Employees

The focus group participants generally reported that their interactions with town offices were positive. One participant reported that their contact with the building department was respectful while another reported that it was a “great experience.” A focus group member told the facilitator that town offices provided a personal, one-on-one communication experience. “One of the values if people have questions they can go talk to and have a one-on-one conversation with department head or department manager.”

One person who was applying for a building permit commented that, “I was impressed by the way I was handed off from department to department to get the various signatures...communication-wise here in the town hall inter departmentally it was excellent.” Other subjects stated that the building permitting process has improved over the years.

Not all contacts were wonderful, however. During initial questions, a focus group member related that his contacts with the town building inspector had been helpful but that the inspector did not come out to inspect his shed on the appointment date. In another case, a participant mentioned that in the past there had been “turf wars” among departments, but that assertion was disputed by another focus group member. “If I called and asked if they could help me out with this... I never saw turf wars, I have seen the opposite.”

The facilitator asked whether town employees were courteous, responsive and knowledgeable. The answers were:

Courteous – “yes”

Responsive – “yes”

Knowledgeable – “yes” though one person said:

“I find a mix, some are knowledgeable there are definitely people that I feel like I am an interruption” when dealing with some staff at town hall. Another said that “People in town hall are really friendly.”

Town Boards

When the facilitator discussed the attitude and behavior of employees of town employees, there was a distinct difference in how the respondents answered regarding town staff and elected town board members in North Attleborough. There was substantial commentary on the knowledge and competence of town boards. Turnover in personnel on the boards, the lack of qualifications and lack of knowledge for various elected board members became problems for effective governance. In addition, there have been public disputes between various town boards.

Several people commented on the policy disputes involving town boards, in one instance disputes between two different boards over the “Afghanistan painting.” There is nothing being done and it’s in an auction house in New York, fighting over a million dollar painting.” This dispute “makes us look ridiculous in the town papers.” This specific situation illustrated a lack of cooperation between town boards.

Other participants stated that townspeople don’t always appreciate the work that volunteer members do on various boards. Many board members put in significant time and effort on these volunteer boards. “I don’t think that the town always appreciated the people who do serve and put in a lot of years and a lot of time, on their own, for no pay.”

Further, several members discussed the lack of civility that occurs with townspeople and town board representatives. Volunteer board members are often the subject of personal attacks from people in the community that don’t agree with their stands on certain issues. “I left the board I was on because I refused to allow people to say the things they said about me.”

Others commented that various board members lack competence to conduct business. This has led to apathy and lack of participation on volunteer boards. “People don’t want to put themselves in a position to be accosted literally” for a position that you take on an issue.

Some discussion followed on how to improve the effectiveness of town boards. One suggestion was to provide training for volunteer board members in topics that would enhance board effectiveness, such as training on how to run meetings and manage boards. There should be a better process for board participation. Board members are unfamiliar with state and local governance statutes such as the Open Meeting and Ethics laws.

Representative Town Meeting Process

Specifically addressing participation for Representative Town Meeting (RTM) business, there were several comments about making that legislative process more effective. “There is no training” for RTM. “RTM is big” not everyone has received information to make the process more understandable. One participant noted that “To try to get all those people together (RTM members) and explain what needs to be done is a gargantuan task” She stated that she hoped it could be “It’s simplified and a little more straight forward.” Various members commented on having more clarity on issues before making legislative decisions. Local governance is complicated requiring adherence to various local ordinances, state laws, etc.

To assist RTM members, focus group contributors talked about the possibility of providing training. Another member stated that the RTM Coordinating Committee conducts training for new members, but questioned whether it was effective. Several commented on making the training more practical for its members. There is an RTM handbook that is “quite detailed.” There appears to be information available but it might not be in the best format for RTM members that have other commitments. It is not clear how many RTM members have completed the training ore reviewed the handbook. This led into a discussion of communication with the town governing process, the next section of questions.

Increased Communication from Town Departments

Numerous participants highlighted the opportunity to use information technology to improve communication and access to town information. Respondents remarked that an expanded town website held potential to improve communication with town residents and among board members and town offices. “I would like to see more on the town website.” Improvements to the website as a communication tool was a specific recommendation that came out of this part of the session.

Among the suggestions to expand website information were placing building code requirements, download forms, proposed budgets, other reference materials and town documents on line for all residents to access in a variety of formats. Information technology provides an “Opportunity to make a huge impact.” Various participants believed that technology can improve the way town information is communicated, especially among the various boards, RTM members and town departments.

For instance, one subject stated that he would like to see a department budget in a spreadsheet format that would allow residents to analyze and examine data as they see fit. Another acknowledged that the town clerk had been posting more information on the website, such as “the last ten years of budgets and RTM and town meeting minutes online.” These types of materials were seen as important informational components for not only RTM members but also residents.

In fact, one key theme during this focus group was the expanded availability of information beyond just the town website. Respondent came back to this idea several times during the session. One subject requested to see data on “Earnings comparisons from private sector and adjoining towns for the purposes of salary negotiations.” This would provide RTM members with an opportunity to analyze the data and make effective decisions about salary requests. “We need to see these comparisons accompany every article for wage changes in order to not underpay or overpay” This type of information will provide sufficient information to negotiate fair salaries for town staff. Another person commented that “I like better details but I just want to know what the cost is going to be.”

Decision Making and Information

Other RTM issues revolved around the information flow needed to work effectively in that role. Various RTM members explained that they needed more timely notification of key issues including receiving information well in advance of meetings. There is an issue of RTM members not being fully informed prior to critical Town Meeting votes. Several participants commented about the difficulty of having RTM members meet routinely before a scheduled town meeting to improve the discussion of topics before important votes. RTM members as citizen legislators have jobs, families and other activities that take up their time. “How does everything get fit in?”

The complex nature of many issues that RTM members must examine generates a number of questions from town officials considering those issues. A collection of information requests from all RTM members would benefit all parties. For instance, one member recommended that frequently asked questions can be generated for members, since various RTM members have similar questions. This would be another opportunity to post information and questions on the website or a discussion board.

There were a number of comments about the need to have more timely and concise explanations of issues before they come to RTM for a vote. For instance, “Here’s a piece of paper or a paragraph that explains it.” Another remarked that, “There are opportunities for leadership here and communication” to present information or recommendations before an RTM vote. The RTM members would like to see policy questions arrive from various town boards with recommendations for approval/disapproval with some rationale behind those recommendations. One person asked whether the RTM Coordinating Committee can “somehow coordinate here’s what the upcoming subjects are for the Special Town Meeting...”

In some cases, RTM members have not received adequate guidance before these issues come to a vote. “Last town meeting, everybody was asked to vote on a reduction there was never any preliminary meetings or explanations beforehand.” Later in the discussion another person observed that, “At no point did anyone at town hall call the RTM Coordinating Committee and say this is coming down the pike.”

Much of the information prepared before RTM meetings and other boards is typically provided in packet type formats for members. In some cases, the material is not provided with enough advance notice to properly prepare members to conduct business effectively. One focus group participant commented, “It needs to be more specific and as simple as possible.”

Other focus group participants felt that the RTM members should do a better job informing themselves. “A lot of people are voting based upon what the FinCom recommendation is.” There was a consensus that better communication would improve the decision making for all boards, RTM and residents. Better more timely information in a concise format will allow decision makers to make more informed decisions.

The discussion came around to information sharing using the town website and other methods. Delegating each town department to manage content on their portion of the website would improve the quality of information there. Another RTM member suggested that the town research how other towns use their websites to communicate appropriate information. “See what each town is doing.”

Changing Nature of the Community

Another interesting observation by an RTM member was that North Attleborough, like many communities is changing demographically. “What we are all seeming to me to be is straddling or trying to run the middle of the road line... between being a class New England town... and trying to stay in the current age.” There are more people living in the town with less time to participate in town affairs.

There was a fair amount of discussion about the role of the Representative Town Meeting format. One comment questioned whether the RTM form of government is appropriate for the long term. Another comment related to the realization that the RTM is the legislative branch of town government and plays a key role in monitoring the executive branch.

Town Services

The focus group as a whole was satisfied with the services offered in North Attleborough. Most of the responses to the town services questions reflected the view that there were a variety of services delivered in generally a fiscally responsible way. A number of responses indicated that given the budgets and resource limitations town departments had, they were doing a good job managing those services. Rather than criticize present town services, many of the RTM members present expressed concerns with future finances of the town discussed in more detail below.

When the facilitator asked, “What services were most important?” Focus group members listed the following:

- Department of Public Works

- Fire Department
- Police Department
- Public safety and schools

Participants specifically highlighted services that don't get much attention. It is "Much more about the aesthetic kinds of thing, the extras like the things the park and recreation provides for us." Another mentioned, "Julia's gardens, town parks... all I think are great." One person responded that "Park and rec (sic) do a good job." Another stated that the Department of Public Works "Keep good care of the grounds."

Another service that doesn't always get noticed but is important to resident lives was the Planning Department. "The Planning Department is in the top as a number 1" and "We are all impacted by it but none of us is involved in it." The Planning Department has implications for many town residents even though they may not realize it.

The focus group had positive experiences with the town library and other town services. "They do a great job." Another questioned, "How they can capitalize on e-readers like Kindle." The food pantry, "Lenore's Pantry through the health department and the Veterans agents" provide extremely valuable services with "huge impact" but are often not recognized.

There seems to be a number of studies done in Planning, the Department of Public Works and other departments, but "Never really hear much about" the results of many of these reports. One participant did wonder about a planned bike path through town. There seemed to have been a plan developed but never fully implemented.

Accessibility of Town Business

One suggested improvement to town services was to expand town office hours to enable people who work out of town to access town departments after work. "It could be in the morning or there are some in the evening. There just doesn't seem to be enough." This comment reflects the changing nature of town residents and North Attleborough as a commuter town, given its convenient access to rail and highway transportation. This suggestion also hints at the opportunity to move more services online like bill paying and registration for town activities.

Focus group members suggested that North Attleborough provide access to board meetings and other town activities in its website for residents to view at their convenience. "They post videos of locally produced shows on their website." Another participant told the group that the last town meeting is on North TV's website.

One recommendation for improved service and convenience is to "Be able to pay every bill online." Given the busy lives of individuals, it is convenient to be able to pay for town services across the board using online bill paying.

Long Term Issues for the Town

Participation in Town Government

Improving citizen involvement was a continuous theme throughout the focus group. “How do you get the younger people to vote and become interested? Every city and town in the country would like an answer to that.” This particular group of town residents is more connected electronically but less involved in traditional community roles like being on volunteer boards and town committees.

Some suggestions to get young people more involved came from the focus group as well. One contributor recommended, “Junior boards and committees” to promote younger voters, while another said, “Why couldn’t we mandate a town government class in the schools.”

Citizen participation problems are not limited to younger community members. Participation in town government has lagged in many places and focus group members had some comments on how to improve involvement. One stated that town officials “Have to reach into their homes... electronically.” There is an opportunity to improve resident access and involvement using various Internet technologies such as website and special topic alerts. “Opt-ins” to get specific topic information the way you want it, such as FinCom or other town services.” “You may get someone that wants one or may get someone who wants 3 or 4 things.” For example some residents may want to see only RTM meeting notes while another is also interested in school committee business.

The community has an alerting system called CTY which sends out alerts for town-wide emergencies. The town has utilized CTY cautiously so that it is not overused and people don’t start ignoring it. The RTM representatives in the focus group felt that it could be used more. One asked, “Is there another avenue” to reach out to people regarding town programs and business? One suggestion is to create an RTM group on CTY, which would send messages to all RTM members.

Other focus group respondents explained how they became involved in town government as illustrations of successful strategies to recruit new members. “I got involved in town government because something touched me, I felt pain.” People in town need to know the key issues in town that will affect them like the \$40 million cost of upgrades to the town treatment plant.

A second RTM members stated, “I got involved because someone asked me to.” A veteran RTM person recruited people to become involved. They had a “Buddy up system” with veteran RTM members mentoring new members. This interaction has been lost over the years but has value in bringing new blood into government. Bringing new perspectives into governance will help with the range of new challenges that the town will face in the future.

Federal and State Mandates

Local government performance has been impacted by state and federal mandates, such as wastewater regulations which will have tremendous cost implications for North Attleborough in the future. Several members commented on having EPA regulators forcing the town to upgrade its sewer treatment plant. “There should be some way of saying to the state that if you are going to mandate it you gotta pay for it.”

“The EPA can inflict their ideas... they are not responsible to design systems, they are costing use \$40 million.” The implementation of these mandates has impacted the town and in some cases, these regulations are not realistic or practical. Participants questioned what could be done to address these mandates in a responsible manner.

Economic Development

Regarding the enterprise funds, at least one person stated that he was not in favor of the numerous special fees for trash, water and sewer etc. rather have it put into the annual tax roll. But not everyone shares that view. On participant likes the pay as you go concept where people pay for the water they use or the trash they dispose. But it is useful to look at how other communities handle these issues.

This concern led to a discussion of the need for an economic development plan for the town. The reduction of manufacturing has hurt North Attleborough like many towns in Massachusetts. Town leaders will have to find a way to build up the commercial tax base otherwise they will become more of a residential, bedroom-type community. Expanding the commercial tax base as par of a well designed development plan will bring a more effective balance between commercial and residential tax sectors.

Should the community be discussing long-term growth in certain parts of the town that can support more of a business tax base? “Are there opportunities within the community for preparing sites ...from a long range standpoint areas that you can rezone... areas where utilities can encroach...otherwise you end up as more of a residential community...”

The town planning board has been developing a comprehensive strategy. “Why don’t you implement some of your ideas on zoning that will benefit affordable housing etc?” The planning board wants to proceed cautiously with a long term plan, as one RTM member stated... “Woow approve some funding, give us a year or two to complete it and that is probably the wiser approach.”

Looking Toward the Future

Sustainability of government services is a key topic for these residents. In a post-recession period, it will become important to be “careful in controlling money and be frugal” as the economy rebounds. Group members realize that they can’t continue to go to the taxpayers for more program funding. Several commented that the town needs to be

more conservative with finances in this current economy. “This town was very well prepared for a lot of reasons.”

As resources decline, there will be a need to evaluate all town expenses. One focus group participant felt that the town should “plan for the worst times before they happen” and went on to say “which hand do I have to take the right or the left.” The Great Recession had an obvious impact on their view of fiscal matters. “(Fiscal year) 12 will be difficult year.” RTM would be advised to have worst case scenario contingency plans in the event the financial circumstances don’t rebound in the short term.

Part of that planning involves having better information as members of RTM and the community in general. As one member discussed above, he would like to download a department’s budget into an Excel spreadsheet and examine for himself using the tools available with analytic software. This would enable citizens to assess cost trends and identify potential areas of financial improvement.

Like many communities in this region, town officials have to consider changing demographics such as planning for an aging population. Other topics include, “how well are we attracting younger families?” These discussions can be part of a long term plan for town growth.

Returning to a theme that was mentioned previously, one participant proposed the creation of a “Technology Advisory Committee” to utilize the information technology knowledge of town residents. They mentioned that the current town Information Technology Department only had two staff members. According to several participants, there had been an initial information technology committee that phased in computerization across the community but that effort had slowed over the years.

Innovative education funding was mentioned by one RTM member as an area the town needs to explore. Town officials should lobby the state legislature for a more equitable education funding formula to shift the burden away from towns. Another participant suggested the community examine education funding strategies in others states and localities. She specifically mentioned innovative funding concepts in Texas as an example where cost sharing with the state government has assisted local school districts.

“Its time to take a look at how others states are handling this.” In Texas, “schools were pretty much equally funded” from the state and local entities. The burden was not placed heavily by property taxpayers.

Sharing a concern with all levels of government, another subject discussed the burden health insurance costs for town employees place on town finances.

Appendix

- A. Participant Introductory Letter
- B. Focus Group Interview Schedule