
RE: What Can We Learn from a local Town that Recently Converted from a Selectboard/Town Meeting to a Strong Mayor/Council Form of Government

The Town is Braintree, incorporated 1640.

By : Paul Cunningham, TMM precinct 8, Peter Svahn, TMM precinct 15

With all of the discussion underway in Plymouth about our form of government and the many claims being made about our current Selectmen-Manager/Town Meeting form vs. a Mayor/Council form we interviewed Braintree's Mayor, Joseph Sullivan, this past October to look into the major differences between the two and the reasons for their change.

While still officially called a "Town," Braintree voters approved a change from Selectmen/Town Meeting to Mayor/Council in 2006, with elections held in 2007.

The new government became effective in January 2008. Mr Sullivan, first elected in 2007 has been reelected twice more (4 yr. terms). He is planning to step down at the end of 2019. Braintree has 6 precincts. Its City Council has 9 members (1 from each of 6 precincts and 3 at large.)

Braintree's population [37,400] and budget appropriations are approximately 62% the size of Plymouth's. The most notable difference in budgeted revenues however is a significantly lower level of tax burden on residential real estate. This occurs for 2 reasons: Braintree has a commercial/ind tax rate that is 2.2 times the residential rate [split tax rate]. 2 With a city form of government [although still retaining the town name] other receipts from fees and the state are proportionally higher. Although one might think Braintree has a significantly higher commercial/ ind tax rate , in fact Braintree's is proportionally similar to Plymouth's. Comparative data on Braintree and Plymouth is shown at the end of this informational letter.

The rationale for change was dissatisfaction with the transparency and accountability of the existing governmental structure, department silos, and a long lead time to obtain approvals. Other reasons cited were the poor condition of the roads and infrastructure, weak committees and management, which is common in part-time government. There were many competing interests in town, in his words no unity and the change promised more efficiency due to elimination of duplicate departments in both the town and school departments. The developer's impatience in the permitting process led to 3 –40B projects [low income housing projects beyond town control] which were built essentially bypassing local regulation.

The annual Spring and Fall Town Meeting became unresponsive, made minor changes for very specific reasons, otherwise large, mushrooming budgets flew through town meeting with little or no challenge to the numbers due to an ineffective finance committee.

Braintree is somewhat unique in that they own the local golf course as well as the municipal light department and all cable/tv and telephone services. Braintree is also a part of the Massachusetts Water Resources Authority and all Braintree properties have mandatory town water and sewer services.

The major differences between Braintree's prior government, which was representative town meeting, as cited by Mayor Sullivan, can be summed up in his two words : accountability and responsiveness.

ACCOUNTABILITY

One person, [the mayor] is in charge of government operations and has appointment authority for committees and boards, subject to council review. The government change facilitated more streamlined operations with significant elimination of duplication between town and school departments. Braintree reduced 33 employees over time, but none from police, fire or the school department.



The mayor has final authority to submit the annual budget, including schools, to the council for approval. The council can cut the budget but not increase it.

The council consists of six precincts, each has an elected member of the council and three councilors at large for a total of 9. They meet twice a month, 22 times a year, and can meet on short notice within 48 hours. The councilors are paid \$5,000, the chair of the council a token more.

The town has improved their bond rating from A- to AA+ and has increased reserves 20 fold. The Mayor cut his first budget by \$983,000 and this year has a \$1.6Million surplus.

RESPONSIVENESS

The council meeting twice a month is a boon to economic development as approval times are dramatically cut. For example, the South Shore Plaza Cheesecake Factory restaurant took 18 months to get approval. After the change of government, a Nordstrom store addition was done in 4 months. The mayor has assigned members of his staff to call on the large taxpayers in the business community on a monthly basis to help with any regulatory situations.

The council, by charter, has a 30day review of all appointments.

The town has an in- house full time attorney and a grant writer.

A combined building division is responsible for all facilities, 16 municipal and 10 school department.

The mayor, by charter has a seat on the school committee, but does not go unless requested.

The fire and police departments are not civil service and hire directly the best qualified applicants. They had no problem following the police chief's retirement with 28 applicants responding, screened by an experienced outside board and key town members, chose the new chief from Maynard. In 12 years, the mayor has never cut a police or fire budget.

THE SCHOOLS

Braintree has 1 high school, 6 elementary schools, kindergarden and special education but no charter schools. Their budget is \$72 million and the school committee submits their preliminary budget to the mayor's office, who has veto authority, but have only had two conflicts in 12 years requiring a few extra meetings.

The mayor created a department of Public Utilities with special staffs for school and municipal buildings with plenty of coordination in getting things done for the 16 municipal and 10 school facilities.

As many other towns will acknowledge, state aid for the town [cherry sheet] and grants improve tremendously because a request to the governor will get a response more quickly to a mayor [representing 35,000 voters] than any one of 5 part-time select board members who can have diffused authority.

OTHER DIFFERENCES

Having 1 head of government allowed many departments to be combined and streamlined. Net reduction of over 28 administrative positions saving over \$950,000 (no reduction in public safety or teacher positions.) (eg. Combined building divisions.)

Annually updated 5-year capital plan.

A Strong economic team driving economic development.

The Community Preservation Act [CPA] rate is 1.00%, which brings in \$800,000 and they spend \$150,000 annually on low income housing and the same on open space and historic preservation.

Newspaper relations with the Quincy Patriot Ledger are good and the towns people are informed through Facebook and Twitter to put out a positive image and provide transparency.

Building a Brighter Future - TOGETHER!



- In the consolidation of departments that in some instances were duplicated between municipal and school departments are now called:
- Municipal Finance Department- includes Accounting, Assessor and Treasurer /Collector
 - Municipal License and Inspection- has a Health Section- enforcement, public health nurse environment health inspector and a Building Section -inspection of buildings, plumbing and gas, inspector of wires, sealer of weights and measures.
 - DPW Facilities & Equipment- equipment section has the mechanics and a specialist on Motors and the Facilities Section has the custodians
 - Police and Fire- savings due to vacancies, promotions and back filling of positions
 - Other departments retain their usual names of Human Resources, Clerk, and Planning and Community Development.

This compilation of information is to study and appreciate the benefits of a more efficient government structure, whether a town exceeds the state guidelines of 40,000 population or not. In Massachusetts, some towns with less than 15,000 population have changed for similar reasons.

Listed below are some comparative statistics for Plymouth and Braintree

PLYMOUTH/BRAINTREE COMPARATIVE DATA			
	PLYMOUTH	BRAINTREE	BRAINTREE %
POPULATION	60,400	37,400	62%
Total Appropriation & fees Budget muni & schools	\$ 263.2	\$160.9	61%
Tax Rate [per % 1000 assessed valuations]			
Residential	\$ 16.54	\$ 10.09	61%
Commercial/Industrial	\$ 16.54	\$22.20	134%
Net required from taxes [millions] * due to higher state aid and other receipts.	\$ 174.8	\$ 91.1	52% *
Residential portion of total Property valuations	82%	79%	96% **
% of taxes from residential Property ** due to higher tax rate on commercial /industrial properties	82%	63%	77% **

PlymouthFirst, Inc. is a community organization that encourages the informed and active participation of Plymouth citizens in local government, works to increase understanding of municipal public policy issues and promotes these ideals through education and advocacy.

Building a Brighter Future - TOGETHER!

