

Bethlehem 2020 Implementation Committee
21st Century Town Governance & Management Structure Options
Frequently Asked Questions

Q. Bethlehem is a great town to live in – why change town government now?

A. Indeed most people agree this is a great town. A survey of town residents in 2009 found that 78% of those surveyed felt that the quality of life in Bethlehem was better than other places in the region. One reason for this is our very dedicated town employees who work hard to see that we have the best services available.

However our town is facing serious challenges that cannot be addressed by the status quo: aging town buildings, pipes and sewer lines, stagnant sales and mortgage tax revenues, higher health and pension costs for our town's employees, and faces competitive challenges in attracting economic development. In fact, the projected growth of Town expenses exceeds the projected growth in revenues. Simply put, we cannot continue to do business the way we have done so in the past.

It is because we want to keep our town a great place to live for people of all ages, *and* be a great place to do business, that we suggest a more modern town government structure to address these numerous challenges.

Q Will these changes save money?

A. Not all by themselves. But they will result in cost savings through the actions that follow. Here's how: Changing from elected officials to professionally appointed department heads would open the doors to consolidating or realigning activities or functions that are similar across departments, making the most of our town employee resources while eliminating redundancies.

This approach was overwhelmingly supported by the 2009 survey of town residents in which over 90% stated support for continuous evaluation of opportunities for improved services and reduced operating costs through consolidation of programs and services.

Did you know that the average household in the Town requires \$1860 more in services that it pays in taxes? In fact, unhappiness about high property taxes overshadows the fact that *only 12 cents out of your tax dollar* supports all of our town services like parks and senior citizens services, public safety, and infrastructure needs like highways, water and sewer maintenance. Finding ways to reduce costs *and* maintain quality of services is very much part of the thinking behind these proposals.

Q. Why are you trying to get rid of these elected officials? They must be doing a good job since they keep getting re-elected.

A. Actually, a change to appointed positions would have no effect on the terms of the four current elected officials or those running this fall. Due to the lead time needed to complete the process, these changes would not take effect until 2014 and beyond. These proposals are not a reflection of how well the current officeholders do their job; it is about creating the best structure for continuous improvement of town operations.

Q. There must be a good reason why the town structure is the way it is, isn't there?

A. Actually the current alignment (see below) is not the result of a thoughtful analysis of the best structure to meet the town's current problems.

Departments with Elective Heads

Highway Department (60 staff)
Tax Receiver (3 staff)
Town Clerk's Office (3 staff)

Other Town Departments

Department of Public Works (60 staff)
Economic Development & Planning (10)
Police Department (60 staff)
Parks & Recreation (10 staff)
Senior Services (6 staff)
Comptroller's Office (4 staff)
Assessor (4 staff)
Human Resources (3 staff)
Management Information Svcs (4 staff)

Why are the heads of the Highway, Clerk and Tax Receiver offices elective, whereas, for example, the Commissioner of Public Works, the Director of Economic Development and Planning, and the Comptroller are not? In truth, as has been acknowledged in recent studies, this distinction is purely an accident of history. Offices created in the early 1900s or before were elected, whereas those created later are not. The current system bears little relation to how large the departments are or how complex the functions.

Q. What is the way forward?

A. Following a public discussion and dialogue of these ideas, the Town Board can consider local laws that would allow for the voters to decide in November on these options. This is not an "all or nothing" exercise. The Town Board and voters can act on these issues up individually. The public's voice in the kind of a future they want for the town will be an important part of this process.