

HOLMDEL CHARTER STUDY COMMISSION

MEETING MINUTES

THURSDAY, JANUARY 13, 2022

7:00 PM

CONDUCTED ON A VIRTUAL BASIS VIA ZOOM

Call to Order

Open Public Meetings Act Notice

I hereby announce that pursuant to Section 5 of the Open Public Meetings Act that adequate notice of this meeting has been provided in the notice, which was sent to the Asbury Park Press, the Two River Times, and posted on the bulletin board in Township Hall and filed in the Township Clerk's Office on December 28, 2021.

Roll Call

Chairman Kin Gee, Vice Chairman William D. Kastning, Commissioners Janet M. Berk, Gerald Buffalino, and C. Zachary Gilstein were present, as was Special Council Scott Kenneally.

Pledge of Allegiance and Moment of Silence

Resolution to Retain Bonnie Thomas as Secretary

Chairman Gee stated that the first order of business is to entertain a nomination to retain Bonnie Thomas as an independent contractor to act as secretary for the primary duty to draft notes and do whatever clerical duties that will be required. Commissioner Berk offered a motion, Commissioner Gilstein seconded the motion. A voice vote showed all in favor.

Chairman Gee did a quick review regarding what they covered at the last meeting and the guests that were present for discussion and went over the interview format.

Invited Guest: Cherron Rountree, Holmdel Township Administrator

Chairman Gee stated that the first guest was Cherron Rountree, who is Holmdel's Township Administrator. He stated that since the administrator is not a current or former elected official the questions that we will ask of her are different than the questions we asked of the elected officials. He turned the meeting over to Commissioner Janet Berk to introduce Administrator Rountree and to ask her the set of questions.

Commissioner Berk stated that Ms. Rountree came to Holmdel in 2019 with a wealth of administrative and policy-making experience. Prior to coming to Holmdel, she served as Eatontown's Borough

Administrator where she was involved in the redevelopment efforts of the Monmouth Mall and Fort Monmouth. She also served as the Business Administrator for Rahway, New Jersey and worked in Union County as Director of Division of Intergovernmental Policy and Planning and as Deputy Director of the Department of Parks and Community Renewal. Ms. Rountree was also employed by the Borough of Roselle as Director of Economic Development Program/Urban Enterprise Zone Coordinator. Along with fulfilling her duties for Holmdel she currently works part-time as Executive Director for Red Bank's Redevelopment Agency. She earned a Bachelor's Degree in political science and psychology from Rutgers University and a Master of Public Administration from New York University Wagner School of Public Service.

Commissioner Berk welcomed Ms. Rountree and thanked her for coming. She stated that she had a few questions that she'd like to ask. She asked if Ms. Rountree could please describe her current or past roles and other experiences in local government or administration.

Ms. Rountree stated that there were some meeting technical difficulties that she needed to figure out and requested that the Commission go on to the next guest and come back to her.

Invited Guest: Eric Hinds, former Mayor and Township Committee Member of Holmdel Township

Chairman Gee stated that Mayor Hinds is the next speaker and he turned the meeting over to Commissioner Zach Gilstein who will introduce him and then ask a set of questions.

Commissioner Gilstein stated that Eric Hinds is a Senior Resident Director for Merrill Lynch in Summit, New Jersey. He's the founding member of the Hinds Pearly Group which manages over 1.5 billion dollars. Eric served on the Holmdel Township Committee from 2011 to 2019 and in 2012 he was voted the Public Servant of the Year by the Journal. During his tenure, he served as Deputy Mayor for four years and as Mayor for three years. One of Eric's critical initiatives was the opening of Bell Works, a relaunch of Holmdel's largest ratable after Lucent Alcatel's departure. As Mayor, Eric was instrumental in helping market and personally attract lessees to Bell Works starting with iCIMS. While Mayor, Eric preserved two properties for the first time in nearly a decade, fought hard to increase the number of volunteer firefighters and began the process leading to the building of a new firehouse. Eric initiated a monthly newsletter to inform the residents of important local matters. In 2017, Eric facilitated an extensive process that led to Holmdel getting a AAA bond rating, only the second town in the county to achieve this. While on the Township Committee, Eric continued to coach HYAA travel soccer and volunteer as an assistant with the highly successful boys' soccer team at the high school. Having the children's best interest in mind, Eric created events like daddy-daughter sleep out and hangouts for the teenagers. Eric is a founding member of Hope for Children where he has served as President since 2003 and the organization has raised over three million dollars for needy families here in Monmouth County.

Mr. Hinds stated that it was a wonderful learning experience and he has a lot of good thoughts when he thinks back and that Commissioner Gilstein touched on a number of the accomplishments. He stated that he's a 22-year resident of Holmdel. He stated that he is happily married to my wife Karen and they have three beautiful children, Eric who is at Notre Dame, Conner who is at Villanova and my daughter is a sophomore at Holmdel High School.

Commissioner Gilstein stated that Holmdel operates under the township committee form of local government and asked, "What do you think works best in the township committee form of government?"

Mr. Hinds stated that it's helpful that you have five equally weighted elected officials, not one greater than the other, so that you're forced to have a majority rule to get things done and if it's significant you need a super majority, like a bond ordinance or so forth and that's probably the biggest positive.

Commissioner Gilstein asked if anyone had any further questions. There were no other questions.

Commissioner Gilstein asked what could be improved in the way our current township committee form of government works?

Mr. Hinds stated that that's a good question. When I was heavily involved, I felt that one of the best experiences we had for not only the heads of the department, but the elected officials, and really the community, was the workshops. It's a full day so it's a lot to ask to do something like that monthly even quarterly, but I definitely think it warrants it more than once a year. Unfortunately, you get an agenda and sometimes the public, for good reason, is not heavily attended, unless, of course, there's something controversial, so I think a workshop two to four times a year and to make a bigger deal of it where you have some of the employees and just more interaction is incredibly positive. You might not need a change of structural government there but I do think that's really incredibly positive. The second piece I would say is that in the current form it might be beneficial to limit the current mayor to two terms, since in theory you're supposed to rotate to avoid any sort of controversy, if it was well known ahead of time you can be mayor up to two years and then you rotate, therefore, kind of always evening out the power.

Commissioner Gilstein asked if anyone had any further questions.

Commissioner Kastning stated, I assume Mr. Hinds meant two consecutive terms.

Mr. Hinds stated that that's correct.

Commissioner Gilstein asked if anyone had any further questions. There were no other questions.

At this point, there was a discussion about tentatively rescheduling the meeting due to technical difficulties, but it was decided to continue with the meeting.

Commissioner Gilstein stated under the township committee form of government the mayor is elected by members of the township committee at the beginning of the year and serves a one-year term. The mayor is directly elected by voters in other forms of government. Do you have any thoughts or comments on the mayor being directly elected by voters instead of the township committee?

Mr. Hinds stated that if you look at all the different forms of government in New Jersey, there are at least seven or eight maybe nine different forms. I think Holmdel's a small town and I think that it's certainly a bigger burden being mayor, so there's a little part of me that's torn. I do think that if the expectation in our current form was that the most the current mayor could do was two consecutive turns and it has to rotate off and that was definitive. I think that would really help the situation as far as

a directly elected mayor. I guess I'm not entirely opposed to it, but then there are more questions that come up from that so I would say that I think the current form can work fine with some tweaks.

Commissioner Gilstein asked if anyone had any further questions. There were no other questions.

Commissioner Gilstein stated that Holmdel's township committee consists of five members who are elected at large by the township for a term of three years on a staggered basis. Effectively this means that a local election happens every year. Other forms of government have one to three years between local elections. Do you have any thoughts or comments on annual local elections?

Mr. Hinds stated I think it's very important that we have a local election each and every year. I think it's a shame that only 40 to 50 percent of the people follow what's going on. I think it's critical that we could never let a year go by because it's the public's way of keeping the elected officials honest and if you ever had a year that there were no elections per se I think there would be a lot of strategy behind that and that you could see bold actions being taken. I think it's important that we have elections each and every year.

Commissioner Gilstein asked if anyone had any further questions. There were no other questions.

Commissioner Gilstein stated that statutorily, the township committee is limited to three or five members. Holmdel's township committee has five. Do you have any thoughts or comments on increasing or decreasing the number of members of a township committee?

Mr. Hinds stated, certainly I think when our form of government was started Holmdel was a lot smaller town, but I think five is a wonderful number; it has to be an odd number. I think the majority of the time it's great if you can get subcommittees and all five working together. It's great if they're all rolling in the same direction, at least with the same common communication goals. If it were seven would it bother me? and if it was three that would be too little maybe, so I actually think five is a really good number for a township of our size. I do know there are some costs to having an elected official, even at three or four thousand dollars a year, and there are some other costs, so I do think it's important that we always consider what are the costs of each elected official and we want to make sure that we don't create more red tape, so less is best.

Chairman Gee stated, I understand what you're saying and is having an extra commissioner or two because of the relatively modest compensation they get for the amount of work that all the township committee do, and people don't realize the effort and everything, so, first of all, we applaud all the members who've been on there, but everything's relative. You said three or four thousand dollars and at the same time, you said having annual elections may not be a bad thing and yet we know that the cost of running an election whether it's direct or indirect is fairly high. The cost of elections if you look at election filings and things like that, the cost of elections is certainly as measured by campaign donations upwards of ten thousand dollars or higher. There are years where we have seen that. There's a term that people use called election fatigue and you mentioned about 40 to 50 percent engagement by voters, but at times I think there are years and certain off years where actually the turnout is even lower than that so it seems like on one hand it's the cost of paying an extra \$3000 or whatever per year relative to a budget of x million it seems like we all are in favor of a smaller government, but it seemed kind of incongruous. Could you talk to that at all?

Mr. Hinds stated that Mr. Gee is right in the sense that a \$3000 or \$4000 salary is not the be-all-end-all if that's the only cost as far as the town is going to undertake when it comes to that. I think the second piece just becomes, at what point is it too much? Is seven a huge difference than five? What are you gaining? I'd want to understand an example of a town where seven really spreads the work out in a different way that works more effectively. I can tell you that there are plenty of times where it's three or four people not always getting to five even doing the majority of the work. I can't say that I'm stuck on five, but I do think that's the minimum. I don't think three is enough; I feel that it's the right number but I can't say I'm really passionate about that piece.

Chairman Gee stated, just to be clear, I'm not advocating more or less I was just curious as to know about the comments about having an annual election versus this because to me the cost of running an annual election is a lot more expensive so I'm not advocating one way or another, but I was curious about your thought process.

Mr. Hinds stated you would always have to have an annual election because it's not just our town there's always the Board of Ed, the county, the state, and the federal. Running an election is expensive and that's why we tend to try to stay away from the special elections, but I think that it would be interesting if everyone took a year off, would we save money? I'd have to all that data, but I would think as long as there's an election then I would want the elected officials of Holmdel to have their feet to the fire.

Commissioner Gilstein stated that elections under the township committee form of government are held on a partisan basis. This means that we have two local elections every year – a primary in June and a general election in November. Other forms of local government allow for council members to be elected on a nonpartisan basis. Do you have any thoughts or comments on local elections held on a partisan or nonpartisan basis such as is done for the Board of Education?

Mr. Hinds stated I think that the thought that political parties and party bosses will not be involved would be naïve. I think that there are advantages to this current system. In the United States, the vast majority it's a two-party rule and generally, people are like-minded on one side or the other. I think it's comforting for a lot of voters to know that they could count on the party to elect a candidate in line with their line of thinking, so I would not be in favor of eliminating the parties.

Commissioner Buffalino stated, I just wanted to get more out of Mr. Hinds on the issue of party bosses and what that really means in the context of what he was just saying.

Mr. Hinds stated I think that the concept behind an individual getting elected because he's party a or party b, in theory, is there's some logic behind that. I think the argument is that you're at the mercy of the local party boss, the county party boss, the state party boss, and at the end of the day I believe that political parties will be involved even if it's a nonpartisan town.

Commissioner Buffalino asked if the advantages of being in column one versus in column seven though is that what you meant when you were talking.

Mr. Hinds stated I think you can certainly argue that if you are the major ticket on the Democrat side or the Republican side, you have the benefit of downstream.

Commissioner Gilstein asked if he believed it is a good thing.

Mr. Hinds stated I believe that unfortunately a lot of the data that gets disseminated out is not always accurate and I think that people need to count on something and they can count on the party being like-minded, at least in some cases. People certainly have had the opportunity to make their own decisions and go against their own party locally and it happens all the time.

Chairman Gee stated that last week we heard from a former mayor of Millstone that described the process a little bit for a lot of people who didn't understand some of the election processes of the county committee, which is a kind of a misnomer and it's really the local committee and they have both Democrats and Republicans, and I think she described a situation where locally they recruited a better candidate and then recommended a candidate, however, when you get to the ballot positioning the county somehow decided that, notwithstanding some of the work being done at the local level, that particular individual doesn't get to be in whatever column. So the first question is, does that seem to make sense to you, and two is, at the local level, I completely agree with you in terms of at the state and federal level where people have a different ideology and they band together that's why we have the two major parties and a bunch of other ones, but at the local level where you have served on the committee for so many years the issues we have tend to be like road paving or deer population and tend not to be about some of what we would consider major party ideology and ideas. Does that really matter at the local level? It's just a question. I'm not taking any position but asking a question of you.

Mr. Hinds stated that in Holmdel, for those that might not know, we have 10 districts and in theory, the Republican and Democrat parties have a male and a female covering each district, and the concept actually makes a ton of sense. You break up the town by geography and you give feedback based on your section. What's important is that with that feedback you get to collaborate with like-minded people about what's important in the town and from there as you're getting educated in the process that's where you should be learning and gathering data and learning about the town and learning about the process. From there you hopefully get the opportunity to be chosen by your party to run, so I think that in theory, it works really well.

Chairman Gee asked how it worked in practice.

Mr. Hinds stated that sometimes it doesn't go perfectly, but in theory, it should work well.

Commissioner Gilstein stated members of the township committee government are elected on an at-large basis. Do you think the citizens of the township would be better represented if we elected some or all of the members of the committee by wards, that is subsections, of the township?

Mr. Hinds stated, when I hear the word ward I think of cities and when I think of cities I can't think of a city that is run well. I feel that's more red tape, more minutiae, so my heart says again less is best, my heart says if we tweak a few things we can get this right. I don't like the concept wards and I feel that that feels less elected official and more political to me. I like elected official versus a politician.

Commissioner Gilstein asked if anyone had any further questions. There were no other questions.

Commissioner Buffalino asked given the geographic breakdown of Holmdel, north versus south, the town is vastly different in terms of critical mass, congestion, sewer versus non-sewer, so the basis of the

question really was to make sure that everybody has some form of voice in the government going on, but I think what you're saying is if it's forced as a ward set up, that it might be more political. Is that correct?

Mr. Hinds stated that it is and I really believe united we stand and divided we fall. I think it's okay when we have differences and you work through that and you discuss it in an open forum, but I don't think the south should be versus the north in Holmdel. There are different dynamics and sewers, proximity to other houses, etc., but I think we need to work together to find common goals and I would think the wards would create more division and I think that's the last thing we need locally, statewide, federally or anywhere. More togetherness.

Commissioner Gilstein stated that the next question is, Holmdel residents can only petition for a referendum in the case of large budget expenditure. Other forms of government allow residents to petition for any ordinance by getting 10 percent of the voters to sign a petition. What do you think about this opportunity for the voters?

Mr. Hinds stated I think the power to the people. I think if there's something important to the people and there is someone who's willing to make a drive and get signatures done. I think the more that we see the public engaged, the better it is and that's the truth so I have no issues there.

Commissioner Gilstein asked if anyone had any further questions. There were no other questions.

Commissioner Gilstein stated, and I think I know you've addressed this question through our discussion, if you could make changes to the form of government what would they be and why?

Mr. Hinds stated that the other thing that I'm pretty passionate about is term limits. I think I really look back with a positive look on the last nine years and what I was able to accomplish. I think nine years is the right number and I really think there should be term limits. I really think that would be positive for Holmdel and it sort of forces new people to get involved to learn to understand where your tax dollars go - how much goes to the school board, how much goes to the township, how much goes to open space, how much goes to the county, what are we getting for those things. I think there's so much that has to be learned and I'll always look back and be thankful that I learned as much as I did. I think the greatest thing Holmdel could do is really like force new people to come in. I'm not saying it has to be two terms, but maybe three terms and it could be six or nine years but there should be term limits.

Chairman Gee asked who holds the record for being on township; I'm not even sure I know, but I know there are other towns where I've seen people on for 20 years on township committees.

Mr. Hinds stated that there's a number of people that have been there 25 or 30 years, not really in Holmdel. I think 12 maybe there's a 15 in there, but I would tell you that there's a circle of life in here. You come in with a lot of ideas and a lot of energy. You want to do a million things and you realize you can only do about 10% of them. Then you settle in and you figure out the system and then at some point, you do get tired and I've seen it almost religiously with everyone and although you don't want to give it up you know part of you does and I just think it would be a positive thing if there was a start and an end. I think it would be incredibly positive for Holmdel.

Chairman Gee asked if there were any other questions.

Commissioner Berk stated, I just want to be clear regarding the previous question. From what I heard, you think that an initiative by petition would be a good thing, right?

Mr. Hinds asked if she could give him an example unless he's missing something about the question.

Commissioner Berk stated that if a group of people have something that they want, they can circulate a petition. There has to be a certain number and then that could become a referendum question.

Mr. Hinds stated I do think that's a good thing. I think that the government is for the people.

Commissioner Berk stated that is not something that under the township type of government we can do.

Mr. Hinds stated I guess I was trying to think back if a scenario ever popped up. I don't remember it ever coming up.

Chairman Gee stated that it's not allowed, but there are some exceptions; for example, if there's a bond ordinance, but with some minor exceptions, petition for referendum or initiatives is not allowed under the township committee form of government.

Mr. Hinds stated, I didn't really seek any counsel on any opinions here and I don't see any harm in that. I don't know what the argument for that restriction would be.

Chairman Gee stated that it's a general New Jersey statute and it's not anything that can be locally done.

Mr. Hinds stated, to me, it doesn't feel like it's in the best interest of the people to have that restriction.

Chairman Gee thanked Mr. Hinds for coming.

Chairman Gee stated that our next speaker also has nine years on the township committee. Roseann Scotto is our next speaker and she's a resident of Colts Neck since 1975. She served on the Colts Neck Board of Education for 11 years from 1978 to 1988, including two years as Board President. After serving on the Board of Education, she turned her attention to local government when she served on the Colts Neck township committee for nine years from 1991 to 1999, including two years as mayor. In addition to her local involvement, Roseann worked at the New Jersey Department of Transportation on Governor Whitman's bicycling initiative and later worked in the New Jersey DOT Federal Liaisons Office. She attended the City University of New York where she was a sociology major. She's married with two grown children. Welcome Roseann and thank you for coming and taking the time to join us.

Chairman Gee stated that Holmdel operates under the township committee form of government. What do you think works best in the township committee form of government?

Ms. Scotti stated I like the township committee form of government because the work is normally evenly split up among the members of the committee and it worked well when I was on the committee. Everyone had their assignments and nobody had all the work of going to all the meetings.

Chairman Gee asked if anyone had any further questions. There were no other questions.

Chairman Gee asked what could be improved in the way our current township committee form of government works?

Ms. Scotti stated, you have to understand I've been out of elective office many, many years, but I've always been active in my community. I think it's very, very important when you do get out of elective office, or even if you've never been, to stay involved in your community and watch your elected officials. I find that if you don't stay involved you have this municipal committee choosing candidates and sometimes those candidates that come up don't really reflect the community. I think you'll find that on your township committee, you'll see people appointed because nobody wants to challenge them and they have the money backing of the municipal committee and they get the column from the county. Things can get out of hand with that form in that you can have five people that may not represent the views of the community, but rather are put in there just by virtue of the fact that they're active in one party or another. I think today people don't stay involved and really know the people that they're electing.

Chairman Gee asked if there were any follow-up questions.

Commissioner Kastning asked, so, in spite of that, do you still favor the township committee form of government?

Ms. Scotti stated I would prefer a form of government that gives you a directly elected mayor. If you had one individual that you're electing they can't hide behind the fact that they're going to get on the committee and lower your taxes. It's going to be very intense getting to know this person as a person and what you want to know is, is this person going to be open to the community, going to be stubborn on some issues, going to put things to referendum when it needs be because we don't have initiative and referendum, although we should all over New Jersey. I believe a good township committee person or a good mayor would be willing to put something to a referendum if the public was very upset about something or very interested in an issue. We did it in Colts Neck many years back and we were grateful because what the township committee was planning to do was defeated in the referendum when we put it to a vote. I think I'd like to see a directly elected mayor. I'm not so sure of a ward form of government, but certainly, one powerful person who really reflects the community and won't shut out the citizens is important.

Chairman Gee asked if anyone had any further questions. There were no other questions.

Chairman Gee stated that Ms. Scotti touched upon what I think you called a municipal committee and in various towns, they are called a municipal county committee, but it really consists of all local residents so let's stick with the term municipal committee. Each party has one of these, it's the republican and the democratic party. One of the things you mentioned is that people have to stay engaged and all that, but something was brought up last week in which the municipal committee went through the process and recruited someone that they endorsed because that individual candidate reflects the values that the folks in the town value, whether that's keeping smaller government, reducing taxes, or keeping the rural nature of the community and yet there were instances where, notwithstanding the endorsement of the local committee and saying John Smith is the candidate, because of the way the election rules and process work, somehow they're not in the favored position of being in column one. Can you speak to that in terms of what's been your experience in Colts Neck? Do you see that working well or not working well? What's your experience or what have you seen?

Ms. Scotti stated, I'll give you a little background, when I first decided to run for township committee, I tried to go before the municipal committee because I researched that that is the backbone of the Republican Party and the Democratic Party and we had a man and a woman from each district. I researched out and found out who the municipal chairman was because the municipal chairman really heads that committee, but the municipal chairman was on the township committee at the time. I wanted to run and I wanted to go before the municipal committee as is formed for to interview candidates and suggest candidates for the township committee or endorse candidates to run. The chairman would not grant me an interview, he would not let me talk to them at all, so I wound up running in the primary and it was against a woman incumbent and I lost by about 76 votes. Then a seat was vacated and an incumbent was running again. It was an all-man committee with one woman, and I asked him since I had been very active on the recreation committee, the board, and all, and he didn't want to run with me, he wanted to run with another man. So that year I decided to file as an independent and I won as an independent. I actually bumped out the incumbent republican, so I wound up then being welcomed to the township committee as the registered republican that I was, but it is a clear example of where that party organization can go the other way. It can go both ways and it very much depends on the people that are in there and the biggest danger as I see, which has happened here in Colts Neck, we don't even know who these people are. I don't know who my municipal chair is and we have people popping up on the committee that are in town for a year or two and somebody blesses them and they have no experience in anything, they don't know where the town has been or where the town is going. I think there's a problem with that unless you have two very strong committees, the Democrat municipal committee and the Republican municipal committee, because then you have a true party system. What's happening here, and I think in my town, which is a problem, is we have more bosses in town, certain people that are running the show. So when it works, it works the way Mayor Hinds was saying. You have all these citizens interested in the town that bring back to the committee certain things from their district. We have eight districts in Colts Neck, and it doesn't work that way. It's supposed to work that way, but I think it was unconscionable that the county chair didn't take the candidate that the municipal committee endorsed. When I ran, of course, the incumbents had the column, but I was put off on the right side in a republican column and I never could figure that one out. I was put, not as an independent, but I was put in a republican column. The county chair has a lot of power to do what they want with those ballot positions

Chairman Gee stated, just to be clear you were a registered Republican when you first started and you wanted to be interviewed and be a candidate. They didn't accept you so you ran anyway in the primary, but obviously, you ran what they call off the line.

Ms. Scotti stated, in the primary, I wouldn't have dared go before the municipal committee because the incumbent woman was running again, so I just decided to challenge her in the primary. I was republican, I was a woman and I just felt that she wasn't holding her own there, so I challenged her in the primary. Of course, that made a lot of people angry and after that, I lost by 76 votes, I decided I'd go the right way and go before the municipal committee. We had an open seat, but at that time I think they liked one token woman on the committee. I had nine wonderful years on the committee and I'm still active in town, still do my citizen thing.

Chairman Gee asked if anyone had any further questions. There were no other questions.

Chairman Gee stated, I think this is kind of related, but under the township committee form of government, the mayor is elected by members of the township committee at the beginning of the year and serves a one-year term. The mayor is directly elected by voters in other forms of government and I

think I heard you say something, but just want to make sure for completeness, do you have any thoughts about the mayor being directly elected? I think you answered that question already and your answer was you were in favor.

Ms. Scotti stated I favor a directly elected because I think it's important and, again, you can tell if a mayor is going to be a strong mayor. The mayor is very strong and especially when it's directly elected and just have to get somebody in there who's not going to close off the public, who's not going to do the things that they're not supposed to do, but sometimes when they get in there they'll do it. For example, we have a township committee now and we have a problem with the mayor. He cuts off the public, they have changed Robert's rules, they have stretched them to the point where you can't even have a follow-up question. We have a problem and you and Holmdel are going to hear about it because we're going to be forming a citizens group very shortly and it's going to have to be like a shadow government here I'm afraid, but it's gone awry. I think the township committee form of government has gone awry in Colts Neck because the people haven't been paying enough attention to both what's happening at the political level and what's happening with the issues in town and especially now with COVID, we have what two years of these Zoom meetings and everybody's comfortable with them now, but we've had ordinances passed, we've had things passed in this town that I would have even challenged them, but apparently, there's legislation that says that the Zoom meetings are okay during an emergency. However, there were instances where there were issues so big that they probably could have had it in an auditorium because the emergency legislation calls for that, if there is enough public interest you can choose a venue like at a high school and they didn't want to do it. I feel that it's even more important in this era of COVID for citizens to keep involved in whatever way they can. It's very hard for somebody like me to do Zoom. I like to be in a meeting and talk to people face to face and I think these meetings are terribly frustrating to the public and a lot of people can't get on because they have trouble. I think we're going to come out of this with a lot of angry people and that things have been going on behind the scenes and we don't have enough input into it.

Chairman Gee asked if anyone had any further questions. There were no other questions.

Chairman Gee stated that Holmdel's Township Committee consists of five members who are elected at-large by the township for a term of three years on a staggered basis. Effectively, this means a local election every year. Other forms of local government have one to three years between local elections. Do you have any comments about annual local elections?

Ms. Scotti stated, I just feel, as Mayor Hinds feels, that more people have to get involved and the more elections you have the better. The problem is, are we really having elections or are we having people chosen to be the primary candidates? Nobody is challenging them as I did and you have nobody running. Maybe you've had opposition in Holmdel, but in Colts Neck for the past several years we haven't had choices. People have looked the other way and I don't know who the powers that be are and I don't think the municipal committee does anything. Whoever is choosing the people, nobody is challenging them so we need more elections and I do not know if they will be yearly, but to have elections you need people and there is a reticence for people to run these days, at least in our town. I don't know how you know what your town is doing. Also, for a woman, people can get mean sometimes and they snap quite a bit. So I can understand why people are reticent to run, but on the other hand, when it means your town can go one way or another, people have to get the guts to go forth and have some challenged elections.

Chairman Gee asked if anyone had any further questions.

Commissioner Buffalino stated, just to elaborate on what Ms. Scotti is trying to tell us is, the interference from outside the town in terms of choosing who's going to run can be quite dramatic is what you're saying and, in some cases, it's a fait accompli and you can't even get around it. It's hard to challenge it unless you change your political party and run as an independent which is kind of unconscionable and shouldn't be, especially if those that are making those decisions don't even live in your town. What are their interests in preserving your town and the things that are going on in your town versus their own political power?

Ms. Scotti stated that that's right and they do keep that power. It's interesting how they keep that power and, as you say, more people don't want to run as an independent because there's money behind you if you run the party line. As an independent, you have to do your own fundraisers and people don't want to do it and I'm a staunch Republican from top-down, but you get Republicans and they don't want to primary them and you have to do that.

Chairman Gee asked if anyone had any further questions.

Chairman Gee stated, I'm trying to reconcile what you said and it's interesting because on one hand, unless I misinterpret what you said, you say we have these elections but are they really elections or are there people sort of being appointed by the powers that be. And yet you say we should have more elections, the more the better, and it seems to me if nothing else that that's an exercise in futility in a sense because it sounds like the democratic process may be broken and I'm not sure whether just having more elections helps the situation.

Ms. Scotti stated, maybe I shouldn't say more elections Maybe I meant to say more contested elections. Let's get out of the woodwork, off our duffs, and start challenging some of these people. I'm telling you, we're at a point now in my town, and I make no bones about it, you're going to read it in the newspapers anyway, where we're going to form a citizens committee and it's going to be like a shadow government because too many things have happened during COVID and many things are going against the will of the people You can't even speak at meetings. So let me rephrase and say we have to have more challenged elections if you want democracy to work. I don't care what party you're in. Once I got in I never felt I was republican or democrat or anything and in fact, I'm friends with Vin Gopal and we have a liaison and I can always meet with him if I want even now in my position as a citizen in a group. I don't think it's republican/democrat necessarily. It gets that way, but I think that at some point there should be more challenged elections.

Chairman Gee asked if anyone had any further questions. There were no other questions.

Chairman Gee stated that statutorily the township committee is limited to three to five members. Holmdel's Township Committee has five members. Do you have any comments or thoughts about increasing or decreasing the number of members of the Township Committee?

Ms. Scotti: I would like to see another form of government other than Township Committee and I'm glad you people are exploring it. I think it's time to explore another form of government. The Township Committee can get very tough and it gets very closed. I can't tell you how many meetings I was at where it's four to one and I'm trying to represent the people and it got to be a hard job after a while. But in a different form with maybe a directly elected mayor. I don't know about wards, but I don't know some other form and I'm sure there are several that you could look at.

Chairman Gee asked if anyone had any further questions.

Commissioner Berk stated, just to be clear for the township committee type of government, is it your main concern that it is partisan and the way people are selected to be on the ballot for one party or the other? If it weren't partisan elections then it would give more opportunity for anybody who wanted to run who felt that they could do a good job would be able to run?

Ms. Scotti stated that even in partisan elections you need people that are willing to run. I don't know about going to non-partisan elections and I know in Tinton Falls they have them. I haven't really thought about that much, but it's certainly a thing to think about non-partisan elections. I haven't thought of it much, but it seems to me like the system we have now works only if people want to run. Maybe a non-partisan form would encourage more people to run. You have two seats open and if you have four candidates it's great. We need challenges and I don't see many. I know in some towns they have them, but I know in my town we've been asleep too long.

Commissioner Gilstein stated, just to make sure your answer to this question is you believe we should explore alternative forms of government, but the number of committee members isn't the key issue here.

Ms. Scotti stated that's not a key issue.

Chairman Gee asked if anyone had any further questions. There were no other questions.

Chairman Gee stated this is for completeness because I think you touched upon and answered it. Elections under the township committee form of government are held on a partisan basis. This means that we effectively have two local elections every year, a primary in June and a general election in November. Other forms of local government allow for council members to be elected on a non-partisan basis. So that means there's no primary, but there's a general election or election for council members, but there's only one election per year. Do you have any comments or thoughts about this? I think you touched on this, but I just want to make sure for the record completeness that we asked that question.

Ms. Scotti stated as I said I think the partisan form of government has its problems now, it really does. You have a strong county there and I've seen some meddling there which I don't think is appropriate, but what you really have to think about is having more elections. Did you know that every two years, I assume you do, you're allowed to vote in the municipal committee people if you're a registered Republican? Did you know that they're voted in? They're supposed to represent us, but they really don't and that's what's happening, too. How many people vote in that election even though they're entitled to vote for them?

Chairman Gee stated that that's kind of tangential and getting into a different process. So just to clarify, the so-called municipal committee we referred to, or in most towns, it's called the county committee, even though it is local people. I think what Ms. Scotti just said is that people don't realize that they are elected. In Holmdel we have 10 districts so, at least in the past, it is always two individuals, one male and one female, though that recently has changed, but you have two individuals from each district within the town for each party that could be elected to that committee. That committee is supposed to do all the things that, if done properly, they would do, but let's leave that out right now because that's

not a characteristic of the township committee form of government except for the fact that we're on a partisan basis and we do have that.

Commissioner Buffalino stated, I know that it's not specific to what we're trying to find out, but I think it should be mentioned, that you still have the issue with column one versus column seven, even with electing members to that committee, right?

Ms. Scotti stated, yes, I do.

Commissioner Buffalino stated it's still very prejudicially set up it.

Ms. Scotti stated it is very prejudicial and some of them get on there and really are not doing what they're supposed to do which is, as Mayor Hinds said, they're supposed to bring your concerns to the township committee and very little of them do. There are a lot of things that are happening that are wrong, but if the public doesn't start getting involved and people start running, we're just victims.

Chairman Gee asked if anyone had any further questions. There were no other questions.

Chairman Gee stated I think you've touched upon this as well so you could again just pass. Members of the township committee government are elected on an at-large basis. Do you think the citizens of the township would be better represented if we elected some or all the members of the committee by wards or subsections of the township?

Ms. Scotti stated I don't really favor wards. I know they have them in, I think, Old Bridge. I think these towns are too small really to do wards. I think as Mayor Hinds said, in big cities maybe it works, but then you're getting special interests in different towns This one will be against a building being there because it's in their backyard and I just don't think that's good. I think that's divisive towards representation.

Chairman Gee asked if anyone had any further questions. There were no other questions.

Chairman Gee stated, with the exception of a bond ordinance and I think a few other minor exceptions, the township committee form of government does not provide for initiative or referendum by petition from township citizens. Do you have any comments or thoughts on this?

Ms. Scotti stated, I always liked initiative or referendum, I thought it should have been passed statewide and years ago when Mount Laurel came in, we had some legislators that were going that way to do initiative and referendum and to get the will of the people. I think also that it behooves the township committee when there's an issue that is so divisive in the public that they're going one way, but they see there's a lot of opposition, I think they have the duty to put something to referendum. I know we did it years ago on something with regard to a piece of land that had to go into the farmland preservation program and because it had already been purchased it was already preserved. I was the one member on the committee that said this is ridiculous, this is preserved, only one house could go on it and you want to buy this for the township so we can make it into a park or something and fortunately I was able to talk them into putting it to a referendum and it was defeated two to one. Had they just gone ahead and purchased this, I mean I was outvoted four to one, it would have been really against the public will.

So I think it behooves, whether the township committee form or not, you tell them when there's an issue that big, we want to put to a referendum, they have a right to do that.

Chairman Gee stated so the difference is that you're on the township committee so you can pass an ordinance or resolution to make that as a referendum, but citizens if they feel differently, citizens can't force the issue or at least for most of the issues, to be a public question to be decided by people. The difference is that you were on the township committee, you had a voice and the township committee can do that by the action of that body, but citizens can't, for whatever reason. If I have a local cause that I'm really in favor of, I can't petition for that to be a public question or to be an ordinance of the township or anything like that.

Ms. Scotti asked, so initiative or referendum, one town can have it and one town cannot? It doesn't have to be statewide?

Chairman Gee stated it depends on your local form of government. Faulkner Act's alternate forms of government almost all of them will allow for citizens to petition for a referendum.

Chairman Gee stated the last question is, if you can make any changes to the form of government what would they be and why?

Ms. Scotti stated I would like a directly elected mayor and I'd love initiative and referendum. I don't know how many forms you're looking at, but those are the two things that if you can get that, I think you'll be well served especially initiative and referendum.

Chairman Gee asked if anyone had any further questions.

Commissioner Buffalino stated you don't think that nonpartisan would be helpful given the issues you've had in Colt's Neck?

Ms. Scotti stated we're practically nonpartisan now because we don't have a very strong democratic party. I think their registration is like 600 or something like that or so in our town. I don't know. If you have a very partisan town where the democrats and the republicans are not gelling on issues that you feel are important to the town, then maybe you should look into nonpartisan. I have no problem with them. You still can stay a registered republican or registered democrat. You're just nonpartisan when it comes to township issues. A lot of the issues that we face are not republican issues and they're not democrat issues; they are township issues.

Commissioner Buffalino stated that's the rationale for going in that direction, if that was a choice. Plus the interference from outside which we don't know how else you could diffuse that without doing nonpartisan.

Ms. Scotti stated, is there one form that has it all, has the initiative and referendum, the nonpartisan and the directly elected mayor?

Chairman Gee stated, we're going to work through this in phases and right now we're trying to study the township committee form of government, and then in phase two, we'll be looking at all the various alternatives and hopefully find something. If I could just follow up with what Commissioner Buffalino

said, I think what I heard was that because of some of the issues with the way the municipal committee is working, the way the candidates are selected, and the way that it appears on the ballot, that's all driven because the elections are pretty much required on a partisan basis. The one way around that maybe is a non-partisan election so you don't have those issues. Is that a correct way of paraphrasing what you said?

Commissioner Buffalino stated that that was correct.

Chairman Gee asked if anyone had any further questions. There were no other questions.

Chairman Gee thanked Ms. Scotti for attending the meeting.

Invited Guest: Cherron Rountree, Holmdel Township Administrator

Chairman Gee stated, Commissioner Berk, I think you had started to introduce and you already read the fantastic packed resume of the administrator. I think you started on some of the questions and I know we have a different set of questions that are more limited. Do you want to just continue with that?

Commissioner Berk stated I was on the first question. Please describe your current or past role and other experience in local government or administration. You can be brief on this since I already read your bio.

Rountree Administrator Rountree stated I think you covered a lot. I'm the township administrator here in Holmdel. We have the township committee form of government. I've been an administrator in a borough form of government, a city form of government and I've worked with several municipalities. I ran shared services for Union County for a while and so I worked with a lot of different municipalities there. I also teach at Rutgers, I teach urban municipal management, which is just municipal management in New Jersey. I've touched on every department in a local government in New Jersey.

Commissioner Berk stated, as administrator, what's your level of interaction with the township committee in that position?

Administrator Rountree stated, I see my role as the administrator as being the liaison between the members of the township committee and the employees of the township. The township committee largely serves as the policy setters. The members of the township committee are not in the office every day so my job is to execute the policy of the township committee and be there every day working with the employees of the township. I serve as a liaison and a point person between the township committee the employees, residents, outside vendors, and contractors.

Commissioner Kastning asked, do you act as a liaison to the professionals as well?

Administrator Rountree stated, yes that's what I meant when I said vendors and contracts. Making sure that contracts are carried out properly and I work very closely with the municipal attorney, the municipal engineer, and the planner.

Commissioner Berk asked, is there anybody in particular on the township committee that you primarily interact with?

Administrator Rountree stated that varies based on personality largely. This is my experience in all forms of government: certain elected officials are more active, more involved, and that you speak with more often. Other elected officials you might not speak with as often but they can still be very active and involved. So it really depends on personality. In general, all of the elected officials, all the township committee members have my cell phone number and I talk to them frequently. It also fluctuates a lot depending on the issue. If there's a member of the committee who you know is a liaison to public works and there's a public works, issue you might spend a lot of time talking to that member of the committee. If it's a recreation issue and you have a liaison to recreation you'll talk to that person more So it largely depends on what the issues are at any given moment and the personality of the elected official and how involved they want to be. I make an effort to make sure that I have some communication with each member or all of the members at least weekly, but usually, it's much more frequent than that.

Commissioner Gilstein stated, so just to be clear, when you say that you communicate with each member at least weekly, would you say your primary interaction is with the mayor or it doesn't really work out that way and it's just whoever has an issue that they're pursuing reaches out to you. I guess I had this impression in my mind that the mayor must be the primary liaison.

Administrator Rountree stated, what I will say to that in my years of experience, in general, what you said is exactly right Commissioner Gilstein. Everybody believes that "go to the mayor." It's just natural for residents, especially if you don't understand the nuances of government. So, to that end, people might tend to reach out to a mayor more frequently than say other members of the township committee, even though in our form of government there's very little difference between the mayor and the other members of the township committee. People might naturally reach out to the mayor whether it be a resident, whether it be a vendor or whether it be a professional. Usually the professionals understand the dynamics of the township committee. So, therefore, the mayor may reach out to me more frequently because whatever issue came up, people went to them. But again, it's largely dependent on personalities and largely dependent on issues.

Commissioner Berk stated because the mayor sets the agenda does that cause you to have more interaction?

Administrator Rountree stated, there's certainly an additional duty there that the mayor has that other committee members don't and so again, depending on what's going on and how involved elected officials choose to be there can be weeks that I am interacting more with one committee member over the mayor. If I had to throw it out there, of course, I probably have more communication with the mayor specifically for those reasons that oftentimes people reach out to the mayor and as a result, I have to execute whatever the issue is. To the point of the agenda, I guess that would be an additional layer of communication with the mayor that I wouldn't necessarily have with the others.

Commissioner Berk asked, how do you think our current form of township government is working and enabling you to do your best work for the township?

Administrator Rountree stated I'm not sure I understand the question, but what I will say is all forms of government have things that make employees' jobs easier and things that make these jobs more difficult and more challenging. Is there something specific about my job that you're asking about?

Commissioner Berk stated, no, maybe that's the answer: that there are pluses and minuses of all different forms. I guess if we're looking at what you previously answered that you basically deal with all the members in pretty much an equal manner. Is that helpful or not helpful and it seems like it is? It seems, from what you said, that if it's a certain issue you might be dealing with one member and that seems to work for you.

Administrator Rountree stated we make it work and like I said, there are positives and negatives to all forms, but it ensures that there's a lot of input from members of the committee. So having essentially five relatively equal committee members does allow a lot of voices to be heard. It also, on the flip side, might slow things down sometimes because for any decision you have to speak with everybody and there's not one person that can make that final decision. So again, six of one and half dozen of the other. There are there area pluses and negatives on all of them.

Commissioner Buffalino stated, just going back to your bio, in the amount of experience you've had in local government, in a very broad sense, is there a form of government that you would choose over another form of government? I don't mean to give you a loaded question here, but I think you of anybody this evening might have a broader perspective on that given your experience.

Administrator Rountree stated, what I will say is given my position in the township and that I am an employee of the township and particularly the sensitivity of this subject, I want to refrain from giving subjective opinions as opposed to objective facts. What I will say is I think a lot of it is a matter of preference. A lot of administrators will say we all want a town manager form of government because it makes our life easier: we get to make the decision and there's a lot of power vested in a town manager form of government. So, if you're talking to an administrator or manager that makes our lives easier because you can move things along a lot quicker. On the flip side, as a resident myself in New Jersey, that form of government doesn't allow for as much input from as many people because of where the power lies. So, I think, depending on who you are and where you're sitting in the scenario, the best form or the preferred form would be different.

Commissioner Berk stated, what do you think could be improved in the way our township form of government works that would enable you to be even more productive?

Administrator Rountree stated when we're looking at it from what you are charged with doing, there are things that make it very difficult in terms of timing and getting things done and accomplished. So, I would say maybe that's an aspect of the township committee form of government that's a little more difficult. You sometimes can't get as much accomplished as a result, but there are a lot of other factors that are at play. Sometimes slowing things down is a good thing and it makes everybody pause and take a look at things. If you can cherry-pick bits and pieces of different forms of government that would be lovely, but they all have some challenges that you're going to face regardless of what form you end up choosing.

Commissioner Berk asked if anyone had any further questions. There were no other questions.

Commissioner Berk asked if Administrator Rountree had any other thoughts or comments regarding the township committee form of government.

Administrator Rountree stated, I just want to say I know this is a difficult task that was laid before you guys so God bless you and thank you for volunteering. I can imagine it's very frustrating because there's not a right answer and "this is what you have to do" or even a way to get to a right answer because everybody's going to have a different opinion. So, I wish you luck in that and again I was trying very hard to be as neutral as possible because let's face it there's politics in everything, and as a township employee it's difficult. I have to balance that carefully and my only other suggestion is reaching out to people that are not employed by the township to get their experience. Me doing this for Holmdel is a lot different than what my conversation might be in another municipality that isn't affecting my livelihood and so that might be something that what you would want to think about is maybe other administrators. I know you brought in somebody from another town so you might already be doing it, but that perspective might be unique and different.

Commissioner Gee stated, if there are no other questions for Cherron, I just want to thank you and I know it's hard. Even though we do believe that the charge is to study the local form of government, Holmdel for the most part, thanks to people like you, is functioning reasonably effectively, but we appreciate the difficult position and appreciate your time and effort in coming and thank you.

Invited Guest: Michael Nikolis, former Deputy Mayor and Township Committee Member of Holmdel Township

Chairman Gee stated that the next guest is Deputy Mayor Nikolis and he turned the meeting over to Commissioner Buffalino to introduce him and then to ask questions.

Commissioner Buffalino stated, based on what I see, it appears that you've been involved with the town quite a bit over the years starting in 2009 being on the environmental commission. Following that, you were elected to the Holmdel township committee in 2016 and during that time you did become Deputy Mayor in 2019. You were also on the planning board during that course of action, and, of course, it seems that you've been involved in the EMT in the Holmdel first aid squad for many years, actually back from 2002. So, we want to thank you for your service there because we know what a task that is at times and being both involved as an EMT representative, as well as a committee representative, is probably very substantial. Is there anything you want to add that maybe I haven't covered here?

Deputy Mayor Nikolis stated, yes that pretty much covers it. I've been in town since 2002. I've been a firefighter and EMT and before that, I'm a founding member of Fire Company II. I was the president of the Holmdel first aid squad for 12 years. I've held all the leadership positions at Holmdel First Aid. I've been on the Environmental Commission, which is near and dear to my heart, since 2009 or 2010 I believe. My children are third generation Holmdel and my wife's family is from here and my whole family lives here, my parents are in town and numerous relatives. I've been on probably about 2,000 EMS calls in this town. I've invested a lot of time, sweat, blood, and tears into Holmdel. First and foremost, I want to thank you for inviting me this evening. I think what you're doing is important. I think it's observed, watched, and monitored by a lot of different people and I don't discount what you're doing. I support what this commission is doing and it's not an easy task. I just want to get one thing out of the way before we begin and that's the f word and the f word is fair. If at any time anybody on the commission feels that I'm not being open, transparent, or honest, I ask that you stop me so we can address it. It's important that this commission do the right thing for the residents of Holmdel.

Commissioner Buffalino stated you've heard pretty much everything tonight since you're the last one up so I'm going to try and combine the first two since they dovetail with each other. Holmdel operates

under a township form of local government, what do you think works best and what do you think can be improved with that form of government?

Deputy Mayor Nikolis stated I've thought long and hard about this and I think the small size has a lot of potential and it has a lot of potential to do a lot of good, but I will say one of the best parts about my time on the township committee was interacting with the residents in town that wasn't in an emergency situation. I've been in hundreds of homes in this town, but I love interacting with people. I gave my cell phone number out to everybody for when people have concerns about their streets not being plowed during the snowstorm, if their curbs are broken, if the leaves aren't being picked up, whether there are EMS or fire response or police issues in town. I love being involved; I love interacting with people in the town and hearing their concerns. Being on the township committee form of government enabled me to hear their concerns and as a first responder for so many years, it enabled me to immediately address those concerns and hear them and not just address them but, understand them, to listen to people. Most of the time people just want to be heard and they just want to have their concerns and their issues be listened to and I would talk to anybody anytime.

Commissioner Buffalino asked do you feel the meetings the way they're held with the township form of government are beneficial to the community at large because they're able to voice their opinions and raise questions to all the members of the committee?

Deputy Mayor Nikolis stated, in the current form, the township form of government, yes, but there are some issues there. Being involved in government was a big step for me and I felt that it was important for me to be involved. Everybody gets involved for a specific reason and my reason was emergency services whether it be fire, EMS, or police. I thought that I could do some good. Also, once you get on the township committee, and there were some issues getting there and I'll get to that point later, but I felt that the township as a whole isn't represented fairly and equitably. I think there's a large part of the town that feels like it's dismissed or discounted and I saw that when I walked and knocked on doors and spoke to people, especially in some of the hidden parts of town. A lot of people don't know this, but Holmdel does have a trailer park and I know a lot of people there and feel like they're ignored; they're dismissed and they're not acknowledged. I've been in a lot of those homes and I will say there are people in the northern part of town and their concerns aren't addressed.

Commissioner Buffalino stated, so you're saying because of your role as on the EMT you were able to experience those things a little bit.

Deputy Mayor Nikolis stated if you tell me a street name I know exactly where it is because I've been on so many calls I know this town.

Commissioner Gilstein asked if the people in the northern part of town are less well represented?

Deputy Mayor Nikolis stated, under our current form of government because elected officials are elected at-large every year, there are other forms of government and I've been involved in government since 1992. So, just for openness and transparency, I was appointed by the Mayor of Rockaway Township back in 1982 to represent the town on the zero-tolerance committee. We had big issues with underage drinking and I was 18 years old at the time. I've worked with campaigns, I've been involved in all different forms of government and I feel that there are sections of town that are underrepresented.

And I know that because I used to live in Old Manor and it took to get on the township community just to get the roads paved and they haven't been paved in almost 35 years.

Commissioner Buffalino asked if anyone had any further questions.

Commissioner Berk stated, to follow up on this issue, there is a form of government where there would be wards or different sections so it sounds like you think that might be a good idea.

Deputy Mayor Nikolis stated it's an idea worth exploring. Using the census figures you can say, I hate the word wards it's so divisive and it's inflammatory in some way in some circles, but I've heard some people say that it's more representative government, it's representative of people.

Commissioner Berk stated, we already have districts.

Deputy Mayor Nikolis stated, we have districts but that's for voting that doesn't mean representation.

Commissioner Berk stated, I understand that, but if you used a different term for it maybe. In the law it's wards, but if people thought of it in a different way maybe it wouldn't be as inflammatory.

Deputy Mayor Nikolis asked, but are those districts representative of the population?

Commissioner Berk stated I don't know how the districts are divided up.

Deputy Mayor Nikolis stated, I would ask the question, how are the districts divided? Is it by population? And when was the last time that population was updated? We recently had a census in 2020. Is it representative of the census?

Commissioner Gee stated that's not really the issue and I think we can we can debate that. I think that the districts are supposed to be roughly equal in terms of population. The issue you're talking about was with representation and therefore you should have township committee people by, let's not use wards, but by certain areas. I think one question that always comes up is northern Holmdel versus southern Holmdel and one example some people always use is Palmer Square and whether their interest is being properly represented or not. I think we're going to touch upon that later, but I think it's not a question of the districts. We could literally spend all night talking about that, but I think we probably should move on from there.

Commissioner Buffalino stated, we spoke earlier about the mayor and whether the mayor is elected or appointed by the committee members. Do you have any thoughts or comments you want to share with us about that?

Deputy Mayor Nikolis stated, in 2016 I was appointed to the township committee on May 2nd before any primaries. Then there was a primary and it was uncontested and that year I ran with then-Mayor Hinds, and immediately after that election the dysfunction followed because there were a lot of hurt feelings because some people won, but they didn't garner the votes to become mayor. I've always said and I felt this from the beginning: let the residents of Holmdel elect the mayor. Let the people vote on who the mayor is, who the figurehead is. It shouldn't be done in somebody's kitchen, in somebody's basement. It shouldn't be done behind closed doors. I think that really is disenfranchising the entire town of

Holmdel. The residents should say who's in charge. It shouldn't be done in some political caucus or meeting. That's horrible, awful and it shouldn't be done ever again. I think that's what leads to a lot of the division in this town. I've lived through a lot of dysfunction in this town and historically this has gone on in the past. This has gone on in the 90s and the 80s. One of the things I said when I first got on the township committee is that Holmdel has a brain trust. Originally, Holmdel had a lot of people tied to Bell Labs. They were on the first aid squad; I met with them. These people were scientists, engineers, true professionals and they were on the governing body. Even they had divisions but they looked at everything logically; it wasn't through a political prism. The town needs to come together and I think doing that is letting the people of Holmdel decide who the mayor is.

Commissioner Buffalino asked, do you think the mayor should have more power than the other committee members or just be elected?

Deputy Mayor Nikolis stated, I think the mayor should be elected and I think it would be more a representative government if the government is more inclusive with people from other areas of town, especially where the people live. Areas like southern Holmdel, especially southern Holmdel should have a voice. I think people in Old Manor should have a voice. I think people in Palmer Square really want a voice.

Commissioner Buffalino asked if anyone had any further questions. There were no other questions.

Commissioner Buffalino stated, question number five then is Holmdel's township committee consists of five members who are elected at-large by the township for a term of three years on a staggered basis, as we've discussed. Effectively, this means that there would be local elections every year. Other forms of local government have one to three years between local elections. Do you have any thoughts or comments about annual local elections?

Deputy Mayor Nikolis stated I have in front of me a copy of the current Holmdel Township republican municipal committee constitution of bylaws. One of the chief responsibilities of this is putting out signs. I hate lawn signs and I think that most people in this town hate lawn signs. There's going to be elections every year, whether it be for congress, whether it be for assembly, state senate, or president, but I think in Holmdel you have to get rid of these yearly elections because it's like every six months and these lawn signs sprout all over the place and it's polluting our town. If we had municipal elections that were maybe every three or four years, that would give people time to learn the ropes. It would enable people to learn and get to know the issues that are affecting our town. That alone would save this town a lot of headaches because it feels like every six months where we go into this cycle of fighting back and forth and it's all the same people. It's the same people every year and every year it's the same issues. Republicans bad; democrats good; democrats good; republicans bad. It's the same thing but we have to get rid of that. That has to stop because the people in this town are smarter than that.

Commissioner Buffalino asked if anyone had any further questions. There were no other questions.

Commissioner Buffalino stated, statutorily the township committee is limited to three to five members. Holmdel has five members, as you know. Do you have any thoughts or comments about increasing or decreasing the size of the township committee?

Deputy Mayor Nikolis stated, no form of government is perfect. Government is a messy business. It's tough, whatever way you go. I've seen the dysfunction that the current form of government has put on the town. One of the impediments of looking back on what happened in the past in Holmdel is that "I know that decision a is going to lead to consequence b." "I know that if we do this, that will happen." All of us sitting here, we have like a God-like view from above of all the issues that won in the past and one of the ways to learn from the past, and predict the future, is to learn from all the mistakes we made and move forward and I think I don't know five is the best way to do it. I think if we increased it, if you had districts in town that were represented over the population and you can have just people in those districts run for office so they're not competing with somebody in another part of town just so that section of town can have a voice, can have somebody that speaks for them, I think that would be very beneficial. Then you can have people that are at large. Let's say just for fun we have nine. So you have three from one area and then you have three every four years, three another four years and then you have the mayor and then you have another two that run with the mayor at large. Then you have people that can step in and fill in whenever and people can get involved. I think the more people that are involved the better.

Commissioner Gilstein stated, what you're saying is you would favor a larger number of members.

Deputy Mayor Nikolis stated I would favor a more representative government. I don't like the word larger; I like the word more representative.

Commissioner Buffalino asked if anyone had any further questions.

Commissioner Berk stated, it seems from what I was following, if you are looking at having more representation that's more likely to be able to happen if we had more than five people, so maybe the number could be seven.

At this point, the recording stopped.

Chairman Gee stated that for the record, just so it's clear, the recording of the session had stopped and our discussion had also stopped at the same time so now we're picking back up exactly where the recording had stopped.

Commissioner Buffalino stated that we're on to question number seven, which is partisan versus nonpartisan forms of government. Currently, as you know, the township committee form of government is a partisan form of government where you have a primary in June and a general election in November. Other forms allow for council members to be elected on a non-partisan basis. What are your thoughts, similar to the Board of Education nonpartisan?

Deputy Mayor Nikolis stated that he thinks all politics are local, but the divisiveness and partisanship in this town have been out of control. I don't believe this town benefits from a primary system. At the township level, we don't have any say over women's health issues, we don't have any say over second amendment issues, we don't have any say over major political issues in this in the country, but unfortunately, we're tied. When I ran in 2016, I was on the line with Donald Trump and I've been a Republican my whole life and I agreed with a lot of his issues, but I've met Donald Trump several times, and he's a buffoon and the man wasn't presidential. I'm a proud card-carrying member of the Theodore Roosevelt Association Sagamore Hill Branch, a big proponent of conservatism and conserving open

space and nature and I don't believe that at the local level tying oneself to national politics helps the town in any way. This body will hear from neighboring towns especially popular elected officials from neighboring towns saying that this is a threat or saying that this is some sort of liberal democrat takeover of Holmdel. Be careful because this is about the people of Holmdel dictating their own destiny and their own future. Don't let that scare you because this commission and the people that are on this commission are a threat to the power that be. I've heard other speakers talk about the county committee system that we have in Holmdel, there are ten districts. I was on the county committee and the county committee has zero influence, power, or authority on who's the selected candidate. To prove that I have printed out numerous emails. I just want to be clear so there's no confusion, I know the county committee meets to select candidates and I have no plans of running for election in the future. Would I ever get involved as a public servant again? One hundred percent, but not under the current form. This is from the current republican chair, "the current county committee has no authority on who are the candidates, that is up to the county chair." Even in the bylaws, it doesn't say that the county committee picks the candidates; it's all up to the county chair. I don't know if Holmdel residents know that. I believe most of them don't understand and it's kind of confusing and I don't believe that's the best way for Holmdel to move forward.

Commissioner Buffalino asked for just a point of understanding, there's a county committee, like the Republican county committee, that has representatives from all the municipalities, then you're referring to a county chair.

Deputy Mayor Nikolis stated that there's a local chair who represents the county committee, so there's a Republican and there's a Democrat county committee. There are ten districts in town; each district is represented by two people, one male and one female. Obviously, it's no surprise to anybody that Holmdel is a majority republican town, so the republican party historically has always dominated the politics in this town, but the county committee, their main job is to register voters, put out signs and make phone calls.

Commissioner Buffalino stated that Mr. Nikolis also referred to the county chair and asked if that is somebody different.

Deputy Mayor Nikolis stated that's one person who does not live in Holmdel, but he's the one who decides who gets the coveted line and the problem with Holmdel is that the election ballot has been weaponized and it's been weaponized to divide this town. It divides numerous towns and I think we have heard this in other meetings with this commission how one individual can come in that doesn't live in Holmdel, that doesn't pay taxes here, but that one individual can come in and divide us because everybody covets and fights for that line. Why? Because if you're on that line you have an 85 percent chance of winning.

Chair Gee stated that we're getting into a very arcane area and he just wants to clarify for the benefit of who is watching this, just to be clear I'm going to use different terms than you. The municipal committee, regardless of how well they do their job or not do their job, their job is to kind of guide through the primary process which a candidate is supposed to be endorsed and so on. However, because of the way the ballot is designed and because there is a column one, whether it's Republican or Democrat, for Monmouth County historically there's a very high percentage that tends to be Republican, and that's line one. To get on that position, it actually says on a nominating petition that if you want to be in column one it requires the permission of the Monmouth County republican organization or the Monmouth County democratic organization. In the case of last week we heard Millstone endorse

Candidate A, however when Candidate A says, "I want to be in column one," it requires the permission of the Monmouth County Republican Organization, which as you can imagine is typically not in the local jurisdiction. When the deputy mayor says by "someone who doesn't live in Holmdel" he's referring to the process of whether that candidate is placed in column one or a different column it is decided by whoever in theory controls that Monmouth County republican organization or the Monmouth County democratic organization. So, to clarify, that's the process that we're currently in and he's not talking about at the local level, he's talking about the appearance on a ballot that is controlled at the county level.

Deputy Mayor Nikolis stated that he's heard other people speak saying that it's bad optics if we change the form of government that we have that we're not being open transparent. But if two candidates go before the local Holmdel county committee and if two candidates are voted on to and win the vote of the Holmdel local county committee that does not mean that they're granted the line. It has zero meaning and no bearing. I think that's what causes a lot of problems, a lot of division, and a lot of drama unnecessarily in town.

Commissioner Buffalino stated that he thinks, Mr. Nikolis has already addressed question eight regarding wards so he's going to skip that one. He stated that question nine is, Holmdel residents can only petition for referendum, as you know, in the case of a large budget expenditure like a bond issue whereas other forms of government would allow residents to petition any ordinance by getting a certain percentage of the voters to sign a petition. What is your posture on that?

Deputy Mayor Nikolis stated that he thinks that the more the voters and residents have a say in issues the better. I think that the people are ultimately the elected officials' bosses and the more power and the more say that they have in any initiative in any issue in town the better.

Commissioner Buffalino asked if there were other questions regarding that from the commission. There were no more questions.

Commissioner Buffalino asked if you could make any changes to the form of government.

Deputy Mayor Nikolis stated that he wished it was representative of the population, of the demographics, of the people, and the concerns and issues of the town of Holmdel. I put my trust in the people of Holmdel.

Commissioner Buffalino asked if there were any follow-up questions from the commission on this and asked Mr. Nikolis if he had anything else to add.

Deputy Mayor Nikolis stated that he wishes this was in person and he knows we live in some very strange times. I haven't been riding on first aid calls and I'll be honest I have a new career and I can't afford to get sick, and just keep all your first responders in your prayers and thoughts because it's wild out there and they need your help and support. It's not easy, everybody is suffering right now. I look forward to the time when we can all meet in person and I just wish everybody stays well. I appreciate you inviting me tonight and thank you.

Chairman Gee thanked Deputy Mayor Nikolis and stated that ends it for all the official business on the agenda. I know we do have one non-commissioner person on there so I'm just going to move into public

comment if there's any public comment unmute, raise your hand, state your name and address for the record and fire away.

Public Comment

Chiung-Yin Liu stated that she wanted to thank you all for your time and service for doing this very tough job. She stated that she is just learning, listening, and trying to understand better what we have currently and also from other towns. I attended the last meeting too. You spent a lot of time on how you present questions and how you're trying to reach other people. Thank you so much for your service. I will continue to learn and it's a wonderful time to learn a lot of ideas, but I think we should focus better on how to make our local government better. For the party issue, I think we can bring parties into focus more so it won't take us three or four hours a meeting because that's very exhausting. If you want to learn more I think we have many more meetings. I actually have a question for our chair, how long will last for those kinds of guest speakers and how many more do you plan to invite to the meeting and how long will we stay on phase one and how long will it be to the next? Do you have a general idea so we will know how many more we could learn and also learn from other towns and do you plan to have other towns that have seven members or very different forms because what I heard from other towns that have come here they're just talking about their issues and their issues may not be our issues and so I think we probably need to be more focused and then give the town, the people and the guest speakers knowing what we focus on in advance so they will focus better what they should address for us and they know how to answer us better.

Chairman Gee stated that this is not a kind of deposition. So, I'd like to make sure to be open and transparent and we'll answer some of the questions, but I want to be careful we're not trying to set precedent for certain things. The plan we laid out is to study the current form of government, which is township committee, and then after the study phase of it there's a phase two, which is to explore alternatives and the options under the alternatives and then phase three, which is the final phase, is deliberation and recommendation. So right now, we're in phase one and I think we want to make sure that we have enough people that come to offer various opinions. Our charge is to study the form of government, the township committee, and as you can see we have guests from Holmdel, but there are other towns within Monmouth County that have a township committee that we think we can learn from because it is that form of government, the characteristics and maybe limitations and we actually have heard from at least two towns now where I think some of the problems are very similar, not always the same issue. I think between tonight and last week we have had five guests so far and we plan to have at least another night with at least three more guests to come and share their insight. We don't want to get to a point where it's repetitive, but we want to make sure that we have a cross-section of opinions and so on so that the commission can form its opinion as to what are the benefits and limitations and what areas we could improve, which is our charge. Then I think at that point we will have a public meeting. Last week we designated February 3rd as a public hearing where, in addition to public comment at the end of the meeting, people can come and we're going to set up the whole meeting just for that if they want to come and express and share their thoughts and comments. I think at that point we can still decide to have more or not and if not then we're going to phase two, where we will look at the alternatives and so on. I think there is light at the end of the tunnel because from a statutory basis this commission has up to nine months to get this job done so we have got to be careful that we don't wind up falling behind. I think the commission is cognizant of time and the plan. I think so far, we've gotten really good input and comments and informative and constructive dialogue. I think we'll have a little bit more of that and a public hearing and then I think we'll decide as to whether we have sufficient information to go into phase two. Do any other commissioners want to make any further comments?

Ms. Liu stated that she had one question, you also mentioned the nonpartisan for the election, and so far, I haven't heard any guest speaker coming from that format, so are you planning to invite any people from that format?

Chairman Gee stated that maybe he wasn't clear, so phase one, which is where we are now, is just studying the current form of government and that's why all the questions are really about the characteristics of a township committee and phase two is when we will look at the various alternatives and the options within those alternatives. One of the things that we might look at is nonpartisan and so it will be in phase two where we might invite guests from the different options and different alternatives where the mayor may be elected directly or the mayor is not elected directly, whether the mayor has more power. There's a Mayor-Council form of government, there's a council/manager form of government and within each, there are partisan and nonpartisan elections and within each that there are mayors elected directly and not elected directly. You could have all different permutations of that; you could have Council-Manager form of government on a partisan basis where the mayor's elected directly and Aberdeen would be a good example of that. You could have a Council-Manager form of government on a nonpartisan basis where the mayor is elected directly or the mayor is not elected directly. So, there are different forms that would be in phase two and phase one, which we are still in, is only studying the township/committee form of government, which is on a partisan basis.

Chairman Gee stated that there were no more comments and therefore he closed the public comment portion of the meeting and asked for a motion to adjourn the meeting. Commissioner Gilstein offered a motion to adjourn the meeting, seconded by Commissioner Kastning. A voice vote confirmed all in favor.

Respectfully submitted,
Bonnie K. Thomas – Holmdel Charter Study Commission Secretary