

[APPROVED: August 31, 2026]
IMPROVING WEST TISBURY GOVERNMENT TASK FORCE
MINUTES
July 27, 2026

PRESENT John Christensen, Susan Wasserman, Sundy Smith
ABSENT. Cindy Mitchell, Chelsea Joiner, and Angela Luckey
ATTENDEES: Skipper Manter

John called the in-person and Zoom meeting to order at 3:35 p.m.

Minutes from July 13, 2026, were unanimously approved with the addition of “in person meeting”.

They will be sent to the Town Hall Administrative Assistant for posting.

Sundy asked if there were standards for meeting minutes. John said requirements are outlined in Mass Gen laws and it is up to the Open Meeting Law (Attorney General) to handle any complaints. If a committee votes on a motion, that needs to be in the minutes. Secretaries, generally do not receive training. We need to be sure that these standards are clearly defined in the “Handbook.”

We liked Sundy’s draft committee charge and appreciated the explanations. She would like to edit the comments for clarity and to direct them to others beside the IGTF. The Task Force unanimously voted to adopt the document as our proposed charge. (Draft attached.)

The rest of the meeting was spent on how we will proceed. John will talk to Jen. He will request time on the Select Board agenda. We will bring three handouts: suggested task force charge; John’s summary of work-to-date; and, a proposal for knowledge capture. (Attached to these minutes.) Both Tara and Jen would be helpful positions to start with to assess both written materials and what we might be missing. Helping staff figure out categories of tasks might be a place to start.

There will need to be some way to keep this work up-to-date—a few minutes a week, but that will require a change in town hall culture to emphasize the importance of keeping information current and relevant.

Our next meeting will be August 10, 2026, at 3:30 pm, at the Town Hall.

Meeting adjourned at 4:31 p.m.

Respectfully submitted,

Susan Wasserman

ATTACHMENTS

1. John's Summary of Task Force work from April 2026:

Welcome to the committee! Let me give you a quick sense of where the Improving Governance Task Force has been, and what we're working toward.

The summer of 2023 saw some non-compliance incidents with committees that caused some consternation in Town Hall, and potential legal exposure for the Town, capped with the realization that some term limits had not been observed. In any case, the Select Board gave us a charge to make this not happen anymore.

Early on, our first instinct was to reach out broadly to committee members and ask how things were working. In doing that, we ran into something unexpected: we don't actually have a complete, reliable way to contact everyone directly. There is a path through Town Hall, but it functions more like a telephone chain than a system you can depend on or audit.

No one in Town Hall was in a position to build and maintain that list—and fairly, they didn't have the time—so we worked around it by using the appointment letter as a capture point. That now gathers contact information going forward and points people to key requirements like ethics and the Open Meeting Law. I've been helping keep that piece moving.

We did get a response to the survey—about 17%, which is actually respectable given the way it had to be distributed. But the most important outcome was that it didn't tell us what we expected. Around the same time, one of us went looking for examples of governance manuals and found one that fits. We used their structure as a starting point, borrowed some language where it made sense, but for the most part wrote it ourselves to reflect how West Tisbury actually operates.

That became *Governing West Tisbury*—a practical guide to how Town boards, committees, and officials are expected to operate—and it gave us a solid foundation.

What the survey and the manual work together made clear is that much of what makes the Town function well isn't written down. It's learned on the job, and in some cases, known to only one person.

That led to a shift in focus.

The Governance Manual describes what we're supposed to do. What we don't always have is a clear record of how it actually gets done in practice. That's where continuity risk shows up, especially during transitions or when something time-sensitive arises.

The next step is straightforward: we're beginning to capture that operational knowledge in a simple, practical way. Not as an academic exercise, but so that what works today can be carried forward more reliably.

Glad you're joining us.

2. Sundry's draft task force charge:

The Improving Governance Task Force was created by the Select Board to help assure West Tisbury town government meets current state and local standards for efficiency, transparency, compliance and public trust. As an advisory group, IGTF will:

- **Identify needed areas of improvement**
- **Research strategies and resources to address identified needs**
- **Create an action plan for implementing strategies**
- **Assist the select board, town administrators, boards, committees and the public in implementing strategies**

I think for dissemination some examples would be good to include. The Task force had already created a handbook, available on the town website for all, that catalogs the functions of various town entities and the laws and expectations that guide them. A starting point for shared understanding.

Currently the task force has identified a need for a way to communicate with all town employees, which includes all official members of committees, on town wide information and concerns. Task force members are working with town officials to create this list and a “home” to guide it’s use.

I also think it is important for us as a committee to model the change we would like to see in collaborative efforts. To this end some broad activities (like an occasional lunch on a topic? Although from my experience in Iowa free food for staff was complicated!!) and also regular inclusion/invitations to specific town officials to our meetings for specific reasons would be good.

3. John’s suggestions going-forward:

Good morning, all.

I've been thinking about the limits of surveys. However carefully we design them, we can only get answers to the questions we ask

By way of example, when I worked on tankers we occasionally had to enter cargo tanks that had previously contained oil. We cleaned the tanks, ventilated them, and then tested for the gases we expected to find: oxygen, hydrocarbons, benzene, and hydrogen sulfide. We didn't test for anything else. That reinforced a lesson I've found true elsewhere: **you can only find what you test for.**

I've used surveys before, both for the Town and for Sail Martha's Vineyard, and I've found the most valuable responses often came from a blank space at the end where people could tell us something we hadn't thought to ask.

That leads me to what I believe is a better approach for this project.

Continuity Companion (or “workbook”): Why We're Doing This

1. In 2018, West Tisbury participated in the Commonwealth's Municipal Vulnerability Preparedness (MVP) program. The purpose of that effort was to identify the town's vulnerabilities to climate-related hazards and to develop practical plans to reduce their impact and improve our resilience.
2. In emergency management, **Continuity of Operations (COOP)** describes how a municipality continues to function during and after a major disruption.
3. The Improving Governance Task Force is borrowing that way of thinking and applying it to a different kind of continuity.
4. **Rather than preparing for hurricanes, flooding, or prolonged power outages, we're asking:**
5. *What conditions make it difficult for West Tisbury to govern well?*
6. Most of the disruptions we face are much less dramatic, but they happen every year. Employees take extended leave. Volunteers retire. Experienced committee members move away. Someone accepts a promotion into an unfamiliar position. A new employee arrives with little institutional knowledge. A procedure exists only because one person remembers how it has always been done.
7. These are governance vulnerabilities.

8. The comparison looks something like this:

MVP	IGTF
Climate vulnerability	Governance vulnerability
Floods, heat, storms	Turnover, lost knowledge, vacancies
Infrastructure resilience	Institutional resilience
Action grants	Policies, practices, documentation
Adaptation	Continuity

Using that framework, a governance hazard analysis might look like this:

Governance Hazard	Current Mitigation	Opportunity
Loss of institutional knowledge	Committee handbook; administrator experience	Knowledge capture interviews
Key person retires or resigns	Appointment process	Succession planning; cross-training
Contact information unavailable	Confidential contact list	Annual verification
Vacant committee positions	Town Clerk process	Volunteer recruitment pipeline
New chairs unfamiliar with responsibilities	Handbook; Ethics links	Chair onboarding
Important files difficult to locate	Shared drives (where available)	Standard file organization
Procedures known by only one person	Informal mentoring	Written "How We Do This" guides
Critical vendor or contractor unavailable	Existing relationships	Alternate contacts
Weak meeting practices	Robert's Rules experience	Chair orientation and checklists
Technology changes faster than users	IT support	Just-in-time guides and training

Notice that only one or two of these involve an emergency. Most are ordinary Tuesday afternoon problems. Yet they consume time, create frustration, and can reduce the effectiveness of town government if we don't plan for them.

When we published *Governing West Tisbury*, we were able to draw primarily on public sources: Massachusetts General Laws, the Code of Massachusetts Regulations, town bylaws, town policies, and established governance practices.

This project is different.

Rather than another survey, I propose we develop a **Continuity Companion** (or workbook): a simple Word document with suggested headings, prompts, and plenty of white space. It isn't another policy manual. **It's a place to capture the practical knowledge that rarely appears in a job description**—the things you wish someone had handed you on your first day.

Think of it as writing for a future version of yourself, or for the person who someday inherits your responsibilities.

If this approach makes sense to you, let's begin our discussion of the template.

If we succeed, we won't simply preserve information, we'll preserve experience.

ON-GOING LIST OF TOPICS THAT WE HAVE DISCUSSED, DON'T WANT TO LOSE TRACK OF AND NEED TO DISCUSS WITH STAKE HOLDERS
[NO PRIORITY ORDER]

1. Importance of comprehensive complete contact list of committee members—how to get names and contacts and who/where should it reside?
2. Term Limits-pros and cons
3. Practice of committee members abstaining from votes citing “conflict of interest,” but participating in debate and discussion
4. TRAINING ITEMS
 - a. Need a process to “on-board” committee chairmen and members. How committees should function or how to improve committee function?
 - b. Investigate training options—Mass Municipal Association and others
 - c. How often—quarterly?
5. Are all current boards and committees necessary?
6. DISCIPLINE:
 - a. Is a procedure needed to remove committee members? How would it work?
 - b. Can WT discipline employees (including volunteers) under state statutes for assault, bribery, harassment, illegal activity, fraud etc. or do we need (do we have) town bylaws?
7. Regular “customer” satisfaction surveys? Who are the customers/consumers? How to access?
8. Audit function is important
9. The value of time sheets for volunteers to quantify contribution to town governance-to be discussed. Maybe too cumbersome.
10. BEST PRACTICES:

- a. Should Town require committees to update their bylaws regularly?
 - b. Is there an expectation and/or mechanism to regularly report committee deliberations to their appointing boards? Importance? How to institute?
- 11. Succession planning: how to record actual tasks
- 12. How to incorporate other, relevant, documents helpful to committees? Where should they reside? How to access?
- 13. COMPLIANCE:
 - a. Create “Compliance April” for annual review of committee functions,
 - b. How to create, implement, get buy-in, and monitor?