



AFTER ACTION REPORT

Town Council - Extended Work Session

TOWN MANAGER WORKING DRAFT

I. SCOPE OF WORK FOR TOWN OF WARRENTON

In the fall of 2023, the Virginia Institute of Government (Institute) was retained to design and facilitate a one-day retreat on Friday January 26, 2024 in Warrenton Virginia, and after the conclusion of the retreat, provide recommendations for next steps including drafting the Council's next 3–4-year strategic plan to provide a foundation for policy and budgetary decisions in sync with the 2040 Comprehensive Plan.

(See Appendix A for relevant sections of the Scope of Work)

II. PREPARATION FOR THE EXTENDED WORK SESSION

Preparation for the extended work session included:

A. Review of:

- The Fall 2022 After Action Report prepared by the Institute and an examination of the key findings and recommendations developed for 2022 Council and the interim Town Manager.
- The Comprehensive Plan
- The Council Handbook
- Town of Warrenton official Website
- Town Council Meeting Information & Guidelines for Participation
- Meeting Order for Work Session and Regular Meeting
- Staff Report format/template
- Contemporary Press Coverage
- Various website from the November 2023 campaign

(See Appendix B for fall 2022 After Action Report)

B. Interviews of Council Members including:

Mayor, Carter Nevill
Vice Mayor, James Hartman (also Ward 4 representative)
David McGuire, At Large
Heather Sutphin, Ward 1
William Semple, Ward 2
Brett Hamby, Ward 3
James Hartman, Ward 4, Vice Mayor
Eric Gagnon, Ward 5

(See Appendix C for Council Directory)

C. Interviews of Professional Staff including:

Warrenton Town Manager, Frank Cassidy
Warrenton Town Clerk, Stephen Clough

III. Extended Work Session

A. Agenda for the Day

After feedback from the interviews of the Council members, an agenda for the day was developed by the Institute and approved by the Mayor and the Town Manager.

The major subjects included:

- **A Review of Fall 2022 After Action Report**
- **Discussion of the elements of a vision for the Town**
- **Consideration of key priorities and major goals for:**
 - *Resiliency: Financial and Workforce*
 - *Preparedness: Technology and Utilities*
 - *Livability: Affordable Housing*
- **Presentation on the roles and Responsibilities of Locally Elected Officials**
- **Conversations around best practices in local government policy setting**

(See Appendix D for the Retreat Agenda)

B. Results from retreat exercises

- Exercise #1 - Norms of Behavior
Assignment – We all have expectations about how others should behave. What are your expectations with regard to the conduct of your fellow Council members?
(See Appendix E for exercise #1 results)
- Exercise #2 - Vision for Warrenton’s Future
Assignment – Look into your crystal ball – what does your best vision of Warrenton look like in the year 2040?
(See Appendix F for exercise #2 results)
- Exercise #3 – Strategic Goals
Assignment – List your top objectives for each of the following priorities and any others you may have that are not listed.
(See Appendix G for exercise #3 categories)

IV. Recommendations For Warrenton Town Council

Recommendation #1

Update the language in the current Town Council Handbook and create a comprehensive document so:

- The public understands the standards and guidelines that apply to their Town Council and Council members
- New members are familiarized with the standards and guidelines during their onboarding to the Council
- Continuing Council members can annually reaffirm their support of its contents, or recommend changes for adoption, at the organizing meeting in January or some other annual date selected by the Council
- Appointed members of committees, councils and commissions of the Town Council will have clear expectations of how they are to conduct the Town’s business

Although Council members appreciate that they are comprised of diverse thinkers with sometimes different policy objectives, a thorough review and updating of the Town Council Handbook is necessary to renew trust and restore cooperation and collaboration to the body as a whole.

Currently some of the language used to describe guidelines and policies have provided room for individual member interpretation which has, in turn, led to misunderstanding and conflict.

For instance, per the Code of the Commonwealth of Virginia, two elected officials may meet to discuss policy elements regarding matters that concern the elected body on which they serve, without declaring a public meeting. Such a meeting may include professional staff, provided attending staff members follow the guidelines set forth by their CAO. Yet the Handbook contains a provision which lacks enough specificity, to lead some to interpret this as a stipulation that the results of such meetings, should they be considered “substantive”, and should they eventually come before the Council, be shared publicly. What is “substantive”? When should results be shared and by whom and what is “publicly”? Without knowing the purpose of this language, or under what circumstances it applies and when it does not, we observe that this is recipe for misunderstandings and is the source of recent controversy among members.

Another example of language that should be updated, is the use of the supercharged word “ethics” referring to a “Code of Conduct” that Councilors agree would make for good working relationships among Council members.

The term “ethics” is typically used by local governments and state agencies to refer to state code sections regarding the *Freedom of Information Act (FOIA)* and the *Conflict of Interest Act (COIA)* that govern open government and ethical principles for state and local government officials.

A “Code of Conduct”, sometimes titled “Operating Agreement Among Members”, refers to an agreement or understanding developed around the “norms of behavior” that members expect from each other.

The term “Rules” generally refers to the operating rules of procedure adopted by the Board or Council at their organizing meeting each January. Contents typically include order of the public meetings, whether Roberts Rules or some other parliamentary protocol applies when decisions are made and also outlines other administrative functions of the governing body.

The term “Board or Council Handbook” generally refers to the compilation of the “Codes of Conduct”, “Board Rules”, and the State dictated “FOIA & COIA Ethics” requirements.

The Town of Warrenton is not in a unique position. With rising incivility on public bodies and in public meetings, jurisdictions across the country are working on “Codes of Conduct” for their own governing bodies and for their appointees who serve on committees, councils and commissions to follow as well.

The retreat developed good work around the norms and expectations that Council members have regarding collegial behavior. Taking this groundwork and updating the current Town Council Handbook should be a significant priority for Council.

With consensus on clear operating guidelines and protocols going forward, facilitating a Town Council that works well together even when there are disagreements over policy direction, the business of the citizens of Warrenton can be better accomplished.

Recommendation #2

Create a Strategic plan for the Council by:

- Using the work of the retreat as a foundation
- Seeking more detail through additional interviews of Council members and staff
- Reviewing the draft at a Council work session
- Presenting it to the residents of Warrenton for comment at a public hearing
- Adopting the plan and establishing an annual performance review to measure progress

V Appendixes

Appendix A - Relevant sections of the Scope of Work

Appendix B - 2022 After Action Report

Appendix C - Town Council Directory

Appendix D - January 2024 Retreat Agenda

Appendix E - Exercise #1 Results

Appendix F - Exercise #2 Results

Appendix G - Exercise #3 Form