# Winsted's Nader report: Gathering dust?

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WINSTED — When Winsted native Ralph Nader released his in-depth study of town government a year ago, responses ranged from enthusiastic to angry. Now, one year later, many citizens say the document, with its extensive list of recommendations, has already been forgotten and few changes, if any, have been realized as a result.

At the time, many town officials charged that the report was unfair, while challengers for political office promised changes. The report became part of campaign rhetoric that fall and the election resulted in major turnover on the Board of Selectmen and an almost totally new Board of Education.

Now, just a little more than one year later, many residents and town officials interviewed were hard-pressed to remember any of the recommendations contained in the report and few people said they saw any real changes as a result of the more than 200-page document.

"I think it's like a lot of reports that wind up on the shelf collecting dust," Selectman Nancy Habbal said.

The Nader report, formally known as "Winchester, Connecticut: The Promise of a Small Town," was written by Thomas A. Wathen at the behest of Nader, a nationally known consumer advocate who grew up in Winsted.

It took more than a year for Nader, Wathen and research assistant Philip Daoust to put together information from newspaper articles, interviews with town officials and 760 surveys from town residents. The report, in addition to giving an overview of the public opinion and problems facing the town, ended with a list of suggestions for addressing the concerns the report had identified.

Many were very specific. Establishing a Board of Finance separate from the Board of Selectmen, arranging child care in town hall during meetings and creation of a citizen activist network to monitor public officials were among the suggestions.

In general terms, the report's final suggestions called for greater openness and accountability by public officials, easier access to information for residents and more publicity for meetings and referendums.

While critics are correct that none of the suggestions at the end of the report have actually been implemented, supporters say the

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report's legacy lies in the way it gave legitimacy to concerns that politicians were dismissing.

Two years ago, just before the study was launched, Nader was quoted as saying the report was needed "because town officials over the years have made too many mistakes and missed too many opportunities . . . and been too eager to not involve citizens by not giving them adequate information and clear procedures."

Though Nader acknowledges the report's specific suggestions have yet to be implemented, he sees a larger and more long-term role for the document.

"I think it's gotten people thinking," Nader said recently from his Washington office. Over time, he believes the report will have an ongoing impact on public involvement and how town government functions, he said.

Several of Nader's recommendations would involve revising the town charter and a recently formed Charter Revision Committee is considering his suggestions along with others.

The town now has a community advocate, lawyer Charlene LaVoie, who provides assistance and advice to citizens involved in public-interest issues.

Thirdly, the public access cable television channel is televising selectmen's meetings, thus making it easier for residents who cannot get out to attend the meetings in person. Selectmen are also discussing hanging a banner across Main Street to advertise selectmen's and town meetings.

Though no one argues that these events are a positive step for the town, some doubt that the Nader report actually led to the changes.

Marie Kamens, chairman of the Charter Revision Committee, said there had been discussion of necessary revisions long before the report ever came out, and most of the suggestions contained in the report had been discussed elsewhere at other times.

"The majority of the changes in the Nader report were directed at the Board of Selectmen," she said, and this is where she sees little change.

At the time the report was released, however, selectmen appointed an ad hoc committee to evaluate the report. The committee in turn made recommendations based on each of the report's suggestions, then issued its own report on the report, at which point, the issues seem to have slowly faded away.

"I kind of lost track of it," said Frank Nelligan, chairman of the ad hoc committee and a former selectman.

Habbal could not recall exactly what selectmen had done with the ad hoc committee's report. "At one meeting, we went over some of them (suggestions). There was a desire to implement, but no action was taken," she said. "It's probably worth taking it down and shaking the dust off again," Habbal said.

But Mayor James A. Pettit doubted that would lead to any more changes. "I'm not sure that the impetus will be there," he said. The annual battle to create a town budget followed on the heels