

FOUR DAY WORK WEEK ROUNDTABLE

DECEMBER 8, 2008

FISHKILL TOWN HALL

A SPECIAL EVENT SPONSORED BY PATTERN FOR PROGRESS

The November 2008 Pattern for Progress Local Government Conference focused on energy issues and savings for municipalities. Representatives from the Town of Fishkill provided a brief outline of their Town's experiences and cost savings after instituting a 4-day work week. Interest was keen and many conference audience members had so many additional questions, Pattern asked Fishkill Town Supervisor Joan Pagones to host a Roundtable dedicated exclusively to the topic.

More than two dozen representatives from towns, cities and villages attended the Roundtable held in Fishkill's Town Hall on December 8. Supervisor Pagones, Comptroller Robert Wheeling and Town Treasurer James Foy led the discussion.

In some respects, Fishkill eased into the 4-day work week by experimenting with flex schedules in 2006. Offices were open from 7:30 AM to 4:45 PM, five days per week with rotating shifts. While expectations that residents would take advantage of the early morning hours to do business at Town Hall "did not pan out," Comptroller Wheeling stated that productivity of municipal employees increased demonstrably.

After the Town of Poughkeepsie Highway Department launched a 4-day work week early in 2008, Fishkill adopted a similar program and expanded it to include Town Hall staff. Initial hours were Monday, Wednesday and Thursday 8:30 AM to 5:00 PM and Tuesday until 7:00 PM.

“Virtually no traffic was generated from 5-7,” according to Mr. Wheeling, “But we did see marked increased traffic in the 4-5 o’clock range.” As a result, the hours were changed to 8 AM to 5:15 PM, four days per week. The Fishkill Comptroller maintains that builders like the earlier opening. Unfortunately since snowstorms cannot accommodate a 4-day work week schedule, the Town requires the Highway Department to go back to five day weeks for the winter months.

Fishkill claims that the mere dropping of a lunch period saves the Town 1.3% on their utility costs. A Seniors program still operating on a five day week in Town Hall is expected to move to new quarters soon. When it is possible to fully “shut down” the building on Fridays, town officials anticipate a 3-5% drop in utility costs.

Morale and Productivity

Anecdotally, Fishkill employees are said to prefer the new schedule. At a time when gasoline prices were in the \$3-4.00/gallon range, employees appreciated the personal fuel savings they enjoyed during the pilot program. Highway superintendents here and elsewhere believe more work gets done and projects completed in fewer days. They credit this in part to the time savings when the ratio of hours for prep work shrink compared to time expended on actual project work. For instance,

putting up and taking down signs and cones for roadwork for a 10 hour day versus 8 provides a 6.7% improvement in efficiency.

While it is too early to measure in Fishkill, the officials said that conversion to a 4-day week in other communities has resulted in a 6% drop in absenteeism.

The new hours appear to have been embraced by the public as well. The Town Clerk and Court offices report increased traffic. More people are coming to Town Hall to pay water, sewer and tax bills in person. Since insuring accessibility to the public is important to the leaders in Fishkill, this finding has helped to reinforce the new schedules. "So far, the Supervisor has had no complaints," according to Treasurer Jim Foy.

An originally unanticipated advantage of the 4-day work week (as well as other flex schedule programs) according to the Fishkill officials is increased availability for volunteer service in fire departments and ambulance corps. Because of close ties to the community through their jobs, municipal employees are believed to represent a larger percentage of local volunteer service providers than that of the general population. Flex and 4-day schedules enable these volunteers to respond to calls during daytime hours when coverage is thin.

Other Programs Cited

Fishkill, the City of Poughkeepsie and the Towns of Beekman and Mount Hope are among the first communities to experiment with the 4-day week.

Over the past three years, SUNY Ulster also instituted a 4-day week for their summer session with recorded savings of \$30K in year one, \$42K the second year and an expected \$50K this year. In a June 07, 2008 *Times Herald Record* story, Claire Burlingham, dean of admissions at SUNY Ulster, called their program a “win-win.” The school’s 125 full time employees are given the option to work a normal 35-hour week by extending their hours Monday-Thursday, taking accrued vacation time or taking a temporary furlough and working shorter hours.

More than 100 schools in 16 states have 4-day work weeks with average savings of 3.5-4%. The District Superintendent in Webster County, Kentucky has gone on record saying that if they went back to a 5 day week, he “and the entire school board would be run out of town.”

Cutting costs by cutting the work week also is seen as a means to avoid employee layoffs. The State of Utah has estimated savings of \$3 million and avoided layoffs.

The Tax Collectors office in Brevard County, FL conducted a survey and found that 75% of employees favored the 4-day work week.

Challenges

While Fishkill employees with second jobs had to finesse schedules to accommodate the change in the town’s hours, Town officials maintain that complaints have been few. The greatest potential pitfall lies in the employee manual. Fishkill’s manual has

required review. “A day is no longer a day,” said Mr. Wheeling. Personal days, sick leave, and vacation should be converted to hours. Fishkill officials also admit that their conversion to the 4-day work week may have been easier because affected employees were not bound by union contracts.

During the Roundtable, the majority of concerns expressed centered on issues of making a 4-Day week work with union agreements. To allay fears, a counter argument was proffered by one participant: Given the apparent high level of employee satisfaction with flex time and 4-day weeks, perhaps the opportunity of converting to a 4-day work week could be a bargaining point in negotiating future contracts? “The outcome would be better quality of life without more taxpayer expense.”

Recent News

Since the Roundtable, a January 6, 2009 story in the *Daily Freeman*, reports that Orange County Legislator Anthony Marino has asked that the “green committee” he chairs explore a four-day work week for county employees. The story credits Pattern for Progress for starting the “regional discussion of a four-day week...”

In the January 12, 2009 issue of the *Times Herald Record*, a news brief describes a New York State Assemblyman’s proposal for a four-day week for non-essential state employees. Assemblyman Michael Gianaris of Queens contends that “the change would save an estimated \$30 million a year.”