

## Basic Planks

### Background and Essential Principles

The Constitution of the United States provides that “no religious test shall ever be required as a qualification to any office or public trust under the United States.” Reform Cohocton supports the original intent of this language. Therefore, Reform Cohocton calls on all those who love liberty and value their inherent rights to join with us in the pursuit of these goals and in the restoration of these founding principles.

- That each individual is endowed by his Creator with certain unalienable rights; that among these are the rights to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness;
- That the freedom to own, use, exchange, control, protect, and freely dispose of property is a natural, necessary, and inseparable extension of the individual’s unalienable rights;
- That the legitimate function of government is to secure these rights through the preservation of domestic tranquility and the promotion of equal justice for all;
- That history makes clear that, left unchecked, it is the nature of government to usurp the liberty of its citizens and eventually become a major violator of the people’s rights; and
- That, therefore, it is essential to bind government with the chains of the Constitution and carefully divide and jealously limit government powers to those assigned by the consent of the governed.

Reform Cohocton will reverse the troubling reality that Cohocton elections have only one name on the ballot. Our mission is to recruit capable citizens to get on the ballot and challenge career politicians who only answer to protect special interest campaign contributors. We aim to encourage citizens to run for office as Reform Cohocton Independents. Republicans are encouraged to run in a primary against those incumbents who represent only special interests. Democrats are encouraged to endorse candidates other than Republicans. Reform Cohocton is bipartisan and seeks support from both party voters. Independents and new registration voters are welcome to create needed reform in our local government.

For too long we in Cohocton have accepted this culture of corruption as the norm. No ethics legislation or commission, no matter how good, can completely rid our system of graft and corruption. But they can set a tone for the conduct of government and send a signal to the public that procedures exist for addressing ethical questions. The following are stated objectives:

- Banning solicitation of campaign funds by government employees and appointees from those they supervise, regulate, or license;
- Banning public employees, appointees and elected officials from accepting gifts from those seeking to influence public business;
- Embracing full disclosure on matters related to public business and the use of public resources;
- Instituting ongoing ethics training for government officials and employees; and,
- Establishing an ethics commission that accepts citizen charges to investigate and rule on ethical concerns and complaints.

Cohocton's town government must be accessible, accountable, responsive, proactive, visionary, capable, and well balanced. It has not been, and it cannot be, in its current form.

### **Character and Moral Conduct:**

Public respect and esteem toward public officials has fallen to a shameful level. **Reform Cohocton** finds that a cause of this national state of disgrace is the deterioration of personal character among government leaders, exacerbated by the lack of public outcry against immoral conduct by public office holders. Our party leaders and public officials must display exemplary qualities of honesty, integrity, reliability, moral uprightness, fidelity, prudence, temperance, justice, fortitude, self-restraint, courage, kindness, and compassion. If they cannot be trusted in private life, neither can they be trusted in public life.

### **Open and Responsive Government:**

An overarching principle for all of these policy positions is the need for open and responsive government. Public officials are elected to represent and act in the public interest. Similarly, appointments by Town Boards should be made based on merit. Appointments to boards and committees should include the wealth of experience, knowledge, and diversity available from the precious resource of our citizenry. Through open and responsive government we can help to restore the public's confidence in the electoral process and their trust in elected and appointed officials.

### **Meetings:**

All meetings of government, including the State Legislature and its committees, should be open to the public and the media so that the process is transparent and the actions of our representatives are known. All Cohocton town government meetings need to conform to New York State's open committee law.

### **Town Appointments:**

**Reform Cohocton** acknowledges that it is within the legal rights of the Cohocton Town Board to choose appointed officials only from their political supporters, but in practice this excludes individuals who might be better qualified and might better serve the constituents of Cohocton. Further, it is the taxpayers that suffer because of political favoritism in town government.

The Cohocton Boards make critical land use decisions for the Town of Cohocton. There is a potential conflict of interest when individuals who are beholden to political candidates and/or a political party, are in a position to decide land use issues involving developers and others who are often campaign contributors. There must be more diversity in town appointments in order to ensure the best possible outcome in land use planning for the people of Cohocton.

In addition, the Cohocton Code of Ethics must be strengthened and applied to all appointed board members.

### **Land Use and Comprehensive Town Plan:**

**Reform Cohocton** supports and has called for the development of an updated Comprehensive Master Plan or Town Plan. The last Town Plan was developed in 1970. Cohocton must develop an updated Town Plan that effectively sets guidelines for preserving the quality of life in our community, promoting economic development and a healthy tax base, and ensuring an environmentally sound future for our children. Local planning decisions have a profound effect on every aspect of our lives.

## Long Term Planning:

- Respect the property rights of individuals while encouraging the preservation of the town's rural character and cultural assets through well-conceived open space initiatives, zoning, and support of agriculture.
- Maintain our town's roadways and facilities; make necessary repairs in the short term to avoid more costly outlays in the long term.
- Encourage economic development consistent with the community's character to minimize the tax burden on the individual taxpayer.
- Support the efforts of various local philanthropic organizations and individuals to further the town's goals.

## Rural Development:

Economic development in rural areas spans many agencies of government, but eventually comes back to prospering, healthy farms and ranch lands. Recreation, local business, schools and education, health care, and energy availability are all necessary to support a diversified and successful rural economy.

Create an economic development policy focusing on local needs and supporting enterprises meeting these local needs. **Reform Cohocton** advocates that this policy promotes locally owned and operated enterprises, whether they are family-owned, community-owned, worker-owned cooperative, or other locally based small business enterprises. **Reform Cohocton** also favors encouraging enterprises that engage in value-adding activities, such as a business using locally gathered recycled materials to manufacture products for local use.

## Agriculture:

Without farmers our nation would soon cease to be. Providing food for people is one of the most important and time-honored vocations. Cohocton should support locally made and grown agricultural products. We believe that we need to support and defend the family farm and discourage the irresponsible and destructive corporate agribusiness that destroys the environment and our rural economy.

## Rural Development Policy:

**Reform Cohocton** believes rural development should begin with the local people. **FAMILY FARMS** are the backbone of a sustainable rural economy. They are more likely than corporate agribusiness to follow ecological practices that enrich the land, use labor-intensive rather than energy-intensive farming methods, and support biodiversity. Because of their smaller scale production methods, they are more likely to produce food products that are healthier for consumers. Federal, state, and local governments should provide financial assistance to small farmers to help them compete against agribusiness.

Farm communities should seek new ways to keep "value-added" processes and profits as close as possible to the farm. Public policy should promote cooperative development of local processing facilities and diversification into the production of higher-value, specialized crops – including chemical-free production.

Family-sized farms should be protected and strengthened through more programs such as **FAIR's** Fund for Rural America, which supports value-added incentives, assistance for minority and beginning farmers, and other initiatives to empower farmers and rural communities to work towards revitalizing rural life. Even removing farm payment loopholes for large corporate agribusinesses would favor the viability of family-sized farms. Programs such as the Fund for Rural America should be given high priority and full funding.

### Community Involvement:

Reforms to allow communities to have influence in their ECONOMIC FUTURE should be implemented including support of locally owned small businesses, which are more accessible to community concerns; support of local production and consumption where possible; support of consumer co-ops, credit unions, incubators, microloan funds, local “currencies”, and other institutions that help communities develop economic projects. Further reforms should be instituted to allow municipalities to approve or disapprove large economic projects case-by-case based on environmental impacts, local ownership, community reinvestment, wage levels, and working conditions and to allow communities to set environmental, human rights, and health and safety standards higher than federal or state minimums.

Local government should encourage, where appropriate, those businesses that especially benefit the community. ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT INITIATIVES should include citizen and community input. The type and size of the businesses that are provided incentives (tax, loans, bonds, etc) should be the result of local community participation.

### Antitrust Enforcement:

We support strong and effectively enforced ANTITRUST REGULATION to counteract the concentration of economic power with its severe toll on the economy. We oppose the largesse of government in the form of narrow corporate entitlements. We should stop the giveaways and subsidies of our vast public mineral and wind resources.

We believe democratic community control over corporations should be strengthened. Chartering a corporation is the citizens’ historic right and civic responsibility. Only citizens have sovereign authority to grant charters of incorporation. Many corporations and LLCs serve the common good but too many cause injury, corrode our democracy, and poison the earth. Therefore we urge state and local governments to redefine the process for granting corporate charters to include standards that benefit the community. We also urge a restoration of the historic civil authority over the governance of existing corporate charters. And we demand that the charters of corporations and LLCs harmful to their workers, to the community, or to our environment be revoked. The certificates of authority of harmful foreign and alien corporations operating in our state should also be revoked.

### Environment:

It is our responsibility to be prudent, productive, and efficient stewards of God’s natural resources. In that role, we are commanded to be fruitful and multiply, and to replenish the earth and develop it (e.g., to turn deserts into farms and wastelands into groves). This requires a proper and continuing dynamic balance between development and conservation, between use and preservation.

In keeping with this requirement, we wholeheartedly support realistic efforts to preserve the environment and reduce pollution – air, water, and land – from irresponsible industrial and commercial development. We believe local policies are best implemented and enforced when they are in keeping with and backed up by responsible regional and state guidelines that take the concerns of all residents into account.

Reform Cohocton advocates corporate accountability reforms. Under current law, individuals are held accountable for the personal or environmental harm they cause, but corporations are not. To correct this scandalous situation, we support reforms that hold corporation executives and LLCs members directly liable for the harm resulting from their decisions.

## Taxation:

Reform Cohocton believes real property taxes should be reasonable and equitable. We believe the current property tax system is a regressive method of funding our schools and local governments because it is based on escalating property values and not on the ability to pay. This current method allows elected officials to claim a 0% increase in the property tax rate even though the amount of property taxes paid is increasing, thereby furthering its regressive impact. We also believe the recent property revaluation process, commissioned by our current Town Board and conducted by Fitts Appraisal Company, needs to be carefully reviewed for systematic inequities.

Reform Cohocton believes in spending the minimum necessary to effectively provide the services required by the town's citizens and supports an open and thorough budgeting process that clearly identifies the costs and benefits of various town services. Funding of town programs should be based on identified priorities and the availability of resources.

## Education:

Reform Cohocton is deeply committed to education and believes that we should:

- Support the efforts of town education leaders towards improving the quality of education for all Cohocton students.
- Approach spending issues with the recognition that more money does not necessarily result in better quality, but be prepared to spend to the extent necessary to ensure that Cohocton's children receive a high quality education.
- Support common sense reforms to the state's binding arbitration laws, while rewarding superior teacher performance.
- Encourage cost saving initiatives through technology, partnerships with other organizations, grants, and volunteerism.
- Work to strengthen communications and coordination between the Wayland-Cohocton School District and the community.

## Legal Representation:

Reform Cohocton believes that the magnitude of a town's litigation expenses is largely determined by how effectively the town is governed and how proactively responsive it is to citizens' concerns. Therefore, the town's first line of legal defense should be developing well-crafted laws, procedures, and policies that take all of its residents interests into account. The primary consideration when hiring legal counsel, including the town attorney, must be whether the attorney has the knowledge, experience, and high ethical standards to effectively advocate for the interests of all of Cohocton's taxpayers and whether they have a demonstrated record of success in litigation. Only then can we be confident that the taxpayers will not be over-burdened by litigation expenses.