

Charter Review Commission Minutes
Monday, January 27, 2014 at 7:00 P.M.
Town Council Chambers

Charter Review Commission:

Present: Patricia Adams, Anthony Arico, Jeffrey Brenner, John Cregan, Mary Alyce Gasbarro, Joel Hellmann, James Jackson, Timothy Sweetser and Town Clerk Meredith DeSisto

Absent: Paul Dulchinos, Alan Klepper and Joan Warren

Town Council:

Present: June Sager Speakman, Kate Weymouth, Cindy Armour Coyne, Ann Strong and William DeWitt

Also Present: Town Manager Peter DeAngelis and Finance Director Kathy Raposa and Tax Assessor Michael Minardi

School Committee:

Present: Kate Brody, Paula Dominguez, Patrick Guida, and Robert Shea

Absent: Scott Fuller

Also Present: Superintendent Michael Messore and School Finance Director Ron Tarro

Commission on Appropriations:

Present: Geoffrey Grove, Joel Hellmann and Tim Sweetser

Absent: Chad Mollica and Rosetta Narvaez

Chair Brenner called the Charter Review Commission meeting to order at 7:00 P.M.

Town Council President Speakman called the Town Council meeting to order at 7:00 P.M.

School Committee Chair Brody called the School Committee meeting to order at 7:00 P.M.

Committee on Appropriations member Tim Sweetser called the Committee on Appropriations to order at 7:00 P.M.

APPROVAL OF MINUTES OF NOVEMBER 20, 2013

Mr. Jackson recommended a correction to the minutes in agenda item "Discussion with the School Committee, School Superintendent, School Finance Director and School Technology Director Regarding the Existing Town Charter and Proposed Changes to the Town Charter," Title 9 – Schools Chapter 2 Powers and Duties: 9-2-2 Organization and Rules: Mr. Shea recommended that the word Clerk change to Vice Chair; and, 9-2-4 Appointment of Superintendent: Mr. Shea recommended the date change from March 1 to July 1. Mr. Cregan and Mr. Hellman amended their motion to include the change to the minutes of November 20, 2013. Motion by Mr. Cregan and seconded by Mr. Hellmann to accept the minutes of the meeting on November 20, 2013, as amended. The motion passed unanimously.

DISCUSSION WITH THE TOWN COUNCIL, TOWN MANAGER, FINANCE DIRECTOR, SCHOOL COMMITTEE AND COMMISSION ON APPROPRIATIONS REGARDING THE EXISTING TOWN CHARTER AND PROPOSED CHANGES TO THE TOWN CHARTER INCLUDING THE FINANCIAL TOWN MEETING

In framing the discussion, Chair Brenner posed the following questions to the group: Should there be a Financial Town Meeting (“FTM”)? If so, should there be any changes to the FTM? If not, then what mechanism would take the place of the FTM? For example, the Appropriations Committee could report to the Town Council and the Town Council could vote on the budget at a public meeting. Chair Brenner noted that any comments by individuals would be treated as personal comments, not the position of the individual’s committee upon which the person also serves. Discussion ensued.

Mr. Sweetser stated he is in favor of the FTM and believes the best time to hold the meeting is the fourth Wednesday of May at 7:00 P.M.

Mr. Hellman stated he does not feel the current system is handling the budget in the best way. He stated the most effective way to finalize a budget should not go through the FTM. He suggested four recommendations to improve the FTM: (1) a motion to alter the budget put forth by the Committee on Appropriations must be filed in advance, must be passed by a majority of voters at the FTM, and that majority must constitute at least 2% of all registered voters in Barrington as of the date of the FTM; (2) a motion to alter any individual line item by more than \$50,000 or by more than 20% of that line item must be filed in advance of the FTM; (3) members of the Committee on Appropriations should be appointed for a period of either two or three years with staggered terms, not one year; and (4) any motion to remove a sitting member of the Committee on Appropriations must be passed by a majority of voters at the FTM and that majority must constitute at least 1% of all registered voters as of the date of the FTM.

Mr. Grove stated there are legitimate reasons why people cannot attend the FTM or stay for the entire meeting. Mr. Grove stated a 1-year budget cycle is very limiting and suggested merging the budget process with a 5-year forecasting budget.

Chair Brenner commented that the public generally trusts the process which is why turnout at the FTM is relatively low compared with the number of registered voters.

Ms. Dominguez agreed with Mr. Brenner, and noted that the voters elect people whom they trust to make the right decisions in the best interest of the Town. Ms. Dominguez favors analyzing different structures for the Financial Town Meeting, such as having Town Council and School Committee work on a budget together.

Mr. Shea stated that the FTM is imperfect but it lets people have a voice regarding the budget. Therefore, he is in favor of keeping the FTM as it exists.

Ms. Brody stated she supports the FTM but would like to look at a better procedural structure. She suggested using electronic devices (“clickers”) to vote because it would be efficient, expedite the voting process, and ensure the privacy of individual voters. She stated that the

electronic voting equipment could be expensive but has heard that other municipalities have shared the expense.

Mr. Guida favors keeping the FTM. He would like the Town Council and School Committee to have an opportunity to present a written position statement similar to the statement presented by the Appropriations Commission.

Chair Brenner questioned whether the changes raised during discussion constituted Charter issues or whether these were procedural issues best left to the discretion of the Town Moderator when the FTM is conducted.

Mr. DeWitt stated that the FTM is fundamentally democratic. He noted that low turnout by registered voters is an issue. Mr. DeWitt also commented that the FTM sometimes results in mischief because there has been a tyranny of the minority due to low voter turnout. He suggested that more people would attend the FTM to vote if the budget and issues were presented on one night, then a vote scheduled for 7-10 days later in a process similar to a special election. Mr. DeWitt suggested that because the FTM decides how tax dollars are spent, tax payers, not registered voters, should be allowed to vote at the FTM. For example, Mr. DeWitt favors having taxpayers who do not reside in Town and business owners vote at the FTM.

Ms. Strong favors keeping the FTM but with more public announcements concerning Appropriations Committee meetings so that people can participate in discussions. Discussion ensued regarding social media to “get the word out.”

Ms. Speakman stated that most people have trust in those who have been elected. She supports eliminating the FTM and for the Council to have 2 year terms. She believes that 2 year terms for Council members would entice more people to run for Town Council.

Ms. Weymouth favors eliminating the FTM but is not in favor of 2 year terms for the Council. She stated that she favors updating the voting process with electronic devices if the FTM remains.

Ms. Coyne stated she is in favor of the FTM and social media/electronic devices for the FTM, because she believes it will help with the process and protect the anonymity of the voter.

Mr. Sweetser stated he is in favor of social networks to encourage participation.

Mr. Grove stated he is in favor of electronic voting because it will streamline the process, keep the anonymity of the voter, and may encourage more people to attend. Mr. Grove stated that existing Charter provisions already allow the Moderator to use electronic voting devices.

Mr. Arico stated out of the 39 cities and towns in Rhode Island, 19 have financial town meetings.

Mr. Jackson is in favor of keeping the FTM.

Mr. Cregan stated he is in favor of the FTM as an informational meeting, but he suggested having the voting take place on an all-day basis 7-10 days after the FTM.

Mr. DeAngelis stated there are safeguards already in place with regard to the budget and urges the Charter Review Commission to keep this in mind. Specifically, he referenced the Budget Hearing which occurs 2 weeks before the FTM which is mandated by the Charter to be an informational meeting so that the voting can take place at the FTM.

Ms. Adams stated she favors an additional meeting between the Budget Hearing and the FTM for questions and answers, then, have a full day of voting.

Ms. Strong suggested a mail ballot process to encourage more participation.

Mr. Minardi stated he is not in favor of the FTM and agrees that we are being represented by our elected officials.

Mr. Messoro stated he is in favor of the FTM.

Mr. Arico, Jr. stated he is in favor of the FTM.

DISCUSS AND ACT ON FUTURE DAY/DATE/TIME OF MEETINGS

Future meetings of the Charter Review Commission are tentatively scheduled for Wednesday, February 12, 2014, Monday, March 10, 2014 and Monday, March 31, 2014 to begin at 7:00 P.M.

DISCUSS AND ACT ON AGENDA TOPICS FOR FUTURE MEETINGS

Mr. Hellmann suggested a discussion on non-partisan elections. Chair Brenner stated he would like to invite Department Heads to a future meeting to discuss the Charter.

PUBLIC COMMENT:

There was no public comment.

ADJOURN

Motion by Mrs. Weymouth to adjourn the Town Council Meeting at 8:45 P.M.

The motion passed unanimously.

Motion by Mr. Shea to adjourn the School Committee meeting at 8:45 P.M. The motion passed unanimously.

Motion by Mr. Sweetser to adjourn the Commission on Appropriations meeting at 8:45 P.M.

The motion passed unanimously.

Motion by Mr. Hellmann and seconded by Mrs. Gasbarro to adjourn the Charter Review Commission meeting at 9:00 P.M. The motion passed unanimously.

Meredith J. DeSisto, Town Clerk