



Watertown Town Council

Administration Building
149 Main Street
Watertown, MA 02472
Phone: 617-972-6470

ELECTED
OFFICIALS:

Mark S. Sideris,
Council President

Vincent J. Piccirilli, Jr.,
Vice President &
District C Councilor

Caroline Bays
Councilor At Large

Anthony J. Donato,
Councilor At Large

John G. Gannon,
Councilor At Large

Anthony Palomba,
Councilor At Large

Angeline B. Kounelis,
District A Councilor

Lisa J. Feltner,
District B Councilor

Kenneth M. Woodland,
District D Councilor

MINUTES

MEETING OF THE CHARTER REVIEW COMMITTEE TUESDAY, DECEMBER 15, 2020 AT 6:00 PM MEETING WAS LIMITED TO REMOTE PUBLIC ACCESS ONLY

Pursuant to Article 8, Section 8-1(b) of the Watertown Home Rule Charter, and pursuant to the Call of the Town Council President, I hereby called a Meeting of the Charter Review Committee, consisting of the Town Council as a whole and six additional voters appointed by the Council President, said meeting was held on Tuesday, December 15, 2020 at 6:00 PM. in accordance with the Governor's Order Suspending Certain Provisions of the Open Meeting Law, G. L. c. 30A, §20, relating to the 2020 COVID-19 emergency and to avoid group congregation, this meeting had only remote opportunities for participation with public access provided as follows:

ACCESS INFORMATION:

- A. The meeting was televised through WCATV (Watertown Cable Access Television): <https://cloud.castus.tv/vod/#/watertown/video/5f490e6f9e1d640008a803ae?page=HOME&type=live>
- B. Public was permitted to join the virtual meeting online: <https://watertown-ma.zoom.us/j/96419264286>
- C. Public was permitted to join the virtual meeting audio only by phone: (877) 853-5257 or (888) 475-4499 (Toll Free) and enter Webinar ID: 964 1926 4286#
- D. Public was permitted to comment through email: vpiccirilli@watertown-ma.gov

The purpose of this meeting was to discuss, consider, and act on the following:

1. Call to Order
Council President Sideris called to order a regular meeting of the Charter Review Committee at 6:00 p.m. Those present were Councilors Caroline Bays, Anthony J. Donato, Lisa J. Feltner, John G. Gannon, Angeline B. Kounelis, Anthony Palomba, Vice President Vincent J. Piccirilli, Jr., Kenneth M. Woodland, Council President Mark S. Sideris, Marcia Ciro, Anne Fitzpatrick, Jonathan Hecht, Leo Martin, James Mello, and William Oates. Also present was Michael Ward, Director of the Collins Center.
2. Continue Discussion of Emerging Themes from Previous Memo (i.e., Legislative Capacity/Balance of Power Between Legislative and Executive, Vision, Transparency/Communications, and Responsiveness/Accountability)

The Committee began its discussion regarding the legislative capacity and balance of power between legislative and executive functions.

In the discussion, the following were discussed:

- It is difficult to discuss differing forms of government without discussing what is not working in the current government and to determine whether the issues are related to the form of government or to the administration
- The purpose of local government is what level of services the citizens demand and the Town Council does to effectively provide those services. Citizens want excellent police and fire protection, high level of education, and good streets and sidewalks. The Town Council has succeeded in fulfilling those objectives. The Town is financially sound,

funding long-term liabilities, building two new schools without raising taxes. Much of this success is due to the form of government.

- While Town Meeting might have been more engaging with the community, it was not efficient for a growing community. Town Council has provided for a more professional and efficient government that is fiscally sound; however, there is a need for more communication to make it fit the goals of a smart city. The lack of communication modernization is not related to the form of government. The Charter may need to reinforce the legislative powers through the charter.
- Mayoral government is less responsive to the public because the mayor creates the budget and the council just approves it; in a Town Council, the Council sets the priorities of the budget which guides the creation of the budget by the executive. The Town needs to ask if it wants to trade a progressive, inclusive, and participatory form of government for a form that is guided by one person.
- A mayor, such as Mayor Menino, can create a vision, something that Watertown lacks.
- Residents are unaware of how the Town Council works and that may be the fault of the Town Council for not making it clear. People need to feel part of the government. Good finances and services also can be found in a mayoral government. It's the people the government hires that makes it work.
- There may be a role for a Mayor with a Chief Operating Officer model; Town Manager seems to resist Town Council and clings to administrative role; there is often insufficient notice to Councilors of administrative operations; staffing may be insufficient to meet needs of Town Manager and Town Council. This may be why a Mayor may be attractive because someone needs to be accountable and that accountability can be measured with the ballot.
- Some of the concerns raised are issues in every form of government because no form of government is perfect. The town needs to find the form that creates balance for the community.
- Mayoral government has more accountability; the public can vote the mayor in or out. The Town Charter may be able to continue but the charter can be strengthened to include such requirements as having a communications participation officer; having an annual state of the Town address; and having meetings set aside for public input, this can promote partnership with the citizenry
- A question was brought up about the role of a mayor. It was stated that State Statutes define these as well as the role of Councilors. Some charters provide variances in format. Some Communities have collaborative relations with the Mayor and Council as it relates to such issues as development and recreation
- When a city has a Mayor, normally they have a Chief Administrative Officer (CAO) or a Chief Financial Officer (CFO)? It was stated that this varies but that is often the case
- The length of term for a mayor is usually two years but the trend appears to be four years
- Cambridge and Boston have full time paid councilors with their own staff; these are the only two in Massachusetts. Both cities have large populations and budgets
- There is no constraint to having the Charter include mission statements or diversity aspirations
- Having a mayor does not mean that a Councilor loses power; there is still the legislative action power; also, there are larger questions for the community than just the budget regarding the powers of the Town Manager and the Town Council
- The choice of a mayor seems to be the choice between a "politician" versus the efficient effective management of someone who is substantively capable A question was raised as to whether other Towns have used their Charters to address the issues discussed and how it affects the form of government. If the government were changed, how is that completed? Mr. Ward stated that there are many communities experimenting with engagement options in their respective charters. The solutions of making a summary available of the Town Manager's evaluation and an annual financial statement for the community to hear and comment on, both of which the Town currently does. Other

options are the 311 call line, requiring councilors to have office hours and/or meetings, and having each district have two councilors.

- There is a need to understand the function of separation of powers and that the legislative should not breach the executive roles and responsibilities
- The Charter specifically separates the powers of the legislative versus the executive.
- There were expressions of concern regarding the lack of governmental response; entrenched management; inability or unwillingness to fill needed positions; underfunding of projects; a skewed membership of the Charter Review with government overly represented; the Council's inability to hold the Town Manager accountable; a stagnant and inbred government. Based on these concerns, the Town needs new energy. The question is are these issues related to the form of government or the lack of oversight.
- Adding positions takes time to be both vetted by the Town Council and then funded in the Budget guidelines. Some positions, such as the Assistant Town Manager, are not funded due to special circumstances, such as the pandemic which makes funding precarious.
- The Committee needs to consider what can be done to improve government. Are full-time councilors needed to make things work better? Does the lack of full-time paid councilors preclude people from being involved? Some people may be deterred because the Councilor's role is a large commitment. The roles of legislative leaders need to be reviewed.
- It is essential to note if the executive feels it is being supported by the Town Council; does the executive have the tools needed to accomplish its tasks. A definition of the tasks may need to be defined and how the charter assists in accomplishing those tasks
- A concern was raised about how the Town Council holds the Town Manager accountable; how the evaluation is completed; is there any room for public commentary; what part of the review is public. The Town Manager seems shielded by the Town Council and unresponsive to direct contact with the public.
- Communication seems to be a big gap. The situation seems to fit the adage of "If you do great things but no one knows it, did it happen?" While many good things are happening in Town, it is not being passed down to residents. There is a need for a unified message of Town activities. The executive needs to be present to the public. The roles of different boards and commissions needs to be defined to the public. No matter the form of government selected, there is a need for a strengthened communications role
- While there are budget meetings, there is a need for effective communication to make the public aware of Council activities.
- The budget process is not a participatory process but there is a summary budget meeting
- Charter needs to address the needs of flexibility, accountability, and transparency
- A clarification was made regarding the funding of the Collins Center. The amount requested was what the Center believed was sufficient to pay for a charter review; it was not underfunded.

Council President Sideris moved to hearing from attendees and to the questions and answers period. He stated that comments from anonymous sources would not be included as the Town Council asks that all commenters be known.

Rena Baskin – Stated she would like a [form of government](#) where the power rests with the elected official who is accountable to the people. The will of the people often seems to be ignored by the Town Manager. The change would allow the citizens to decide if the elected official has served the Town well.

Elodia Thomas – Asked if a precinct cannot be more than 4,000 voters, would the Town consider increasing the District Councilors to 6 for the 12 precincts with 2 At-large

Councilors. She also asked about salaries and health benefits: Mr. Ward stated data would be provided regarding the salaries. Also it was noted that some cities with mayors provide only the mayor with health benefits; other communities have clauses terminating the benefit once an elected official leaves office. Providing health benefits elimination is a trend that has been happening the 1990's.

Sara Ryan – stated solutions often come in many layers. The Committee needs to consider if greater compensation would help. She personally has had great experience with her interaction with the Town. If the Town had a mayor would the communication improve?

In the Q & A:

Elodia Thomas – commented on the hiring of three positions in the IT Department. She requested a copy of the budget law be posted to the website. Council President Sideris stated that would be done.

Tiffany Rose York – Requested the number of participants and why participants could not be seen. Council President Sideris stated that there were 23 attendees and 18 participants. The current format is considered the most secure to prevent Zoom bombing. It is a matter that is being researched.

Why can't the public weigh in on the Town Manager's evaluation? Council President Sideris stated the Town Manager's evaluation is regulated by the Town Charter, but it can be discussed.

Why does the Town move to executive session which seems to stonewall issues that affect the community? Council President Sideris stated most of these relate to collective bargaining and are not done in public.

Eric Kemp Benedict – Stated At-Large representation is active and present in the community

Rita Colifella – The discourse needs to improve; many are trying to comprehend but others have vested interests.

Marcy Merningham – When will the Committee discuss Vision? It seems structure and process flow from that. Creation and modification can be generated from a vision, aspirational metrics can be derived for both budgetary and non-financial needs. Council President Sideris stated that will be considered.

3. Discuss Additional Research to Request from the Center

Mr. Ward, Director of the Collins Center, asked the Committee that with the long period before the next meeting, what reading material would the Committee like to have.

- Examples of mayoral governments that provide both sound fiscal stability and good housing policies
- Examples of mayoral systems that are not efficient
- Examples of mayoral governments with strong CFO positions
- Academic research that municipalities are employing for effective outreach communication strategies; best practices
- Documents on how the legislative branch can accomplish what it should be doing
- Survey of ideas regarding the legislative branch; what is the range of the legislative functions and what are its restrictions, and what tasks are affected by the legislative function
- Information regarding compensation packages
- Examples of Town Council and Town Manager operations are working well; how can we strengthen and increase accountability
- Examples of supplementary Councilor services – staffing, offices, constituent services

- Tenure profile of Mayors and Town Managers and turnover rates
- List of communities that requested special legislation to cover fiscal deficits over the last 20 years
- List of 10 communities with the lowest growth rates and are approaching their debt ceiling

In the Q & A, the following comments were made

- The Town needs a vision
- The committee needs to get more specific in its comments
- How is the Town Council held accountable
- There is no place to go with a citizen's problems
- The basis of the Town Manager's evaluation needs change. Council President Sideris stated this could altered.

4. Overview of Proposed Panel of Other Municipal Leaders for January

Mr. Ward noted in January, there will be panels of people who represent both Mayoral and Town council governments. This would be a prime time to ask many of the questions posed in the discussions.

5. Communications Committee Update

Chair Ciro read the Communications Committee minutes. The Committee discussed methods of outreach – speaking local groups, electronic media, sandwich boards, bulletin boards, the Town Manager announcements in the tax bills, updates on Facebook and Twitter, Cable TV, and polling through the website. The Committee has agreed to meet every two weeks, is investigating opportunities to speak at groups to increase participation; placing flyers and sandwich boards soon. Also there was a meeting with the CIO regarding the website reorganization and for providing a forum for the community.

Council President Sideris stated that the acceptance of the minutes would be taken up at the following meeting.

A comment was made that the link on the website does not work.

A question was asked as to how the Committee's efforts would be considered a success. It was stated that would be defined over time with increased participation and that anything done would be an improvement over the current communication.

Tiffany Rose York asked if the discussions would be extended if needed. Mr. Ward stated that if a change of government were decided upon that would be a process that would take a longer time. If the Town Council form were retained, then the Committee would work towards providing suggested changes in time for the November ballot.

6. Next meetings

The next meetings were scheduled for January 5 and January 19, 2021.

7. Adjournment

Councilor Piccirilli moved to adjourn; Councilor Woodland seconded the motion. The motion was adopted unanimously on a roll call vote. The meeting adjourned at 8:19 p.m.

Minutes prepared by Marilyn W. Pronovost