

Minutes of The East Lyme Charter Revision Commission Public Hearing - 11/01/22

Date and time: 11/01/22 07:00 pm to: 11/01/22 07:30 pm

Present: Brooke Stevens, Recording Secretary, Charter Revision Commission Members Present:, Jeffrey McNamara, Marc Salerno, Timothy Hagen , Larry Fitzgerald, Beth Hogan, Jay Ginsberg, Wayne Blair , Maryanna Stevens , Anna Johnson, Absent:, Barry Sheckley, Vivek Puohit

CC: Kevin Seery, First Selectman, Ed O'Connell, Town Attorney, Ann Cicchiello, Board of Selectmen Member, Sam Geary, Charter Revision Research Assistant

Location: East Lyme Middle School, 31 Society Road, Niantic, CT 06357

Topics

1. Call to Order & Pledge of Allegiance

Note: Chairman Salerno called the Public Hearing to order at 7:02 p.m., led the pledge, and introduced the Commission Members to the Public in attendance.

2. Welcoming Remarks by First Selectman & Chairman

Note: Mr. Salerno explained that the Board of Selectmen has tasked them with thirteen items to consider for Charter Revision, that range from items such as elections, how local government is run, and how we advertise public hearings. He asked Kevin Seery, the First Selectman, to offer some opening remarks before they call for public comment.

Note: Mr. Seery noted the Town hasn't done a Charter Revision in 14 years, which is the longest they've gone without one; they've seen many technical and communication changes which need to be reflected in the Charter, very simply, they want to make government serve people better and provide a better product to the Town residents.

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Cassidy M. Salerno
TOWN CLERK

Note Mr. Salerno reviewed the thirteen items they've been charged with, which include the following:

1. Consider possible elimination of automatic budget referendum provision in Section 7.3 of the Charter.
2. Consider possible merger of the Planning Commission and Zoning Commission.
3. Consider possible amendment of Section 2.7 to provide four-year terms of Selectmen and two- or four-year terms of First Selectman.
4. Consider possible removal of Town Clerk and Tax Collector from elective offices and add said offices to administrative offices.
5. Consider the possible exemption from the residency requirement set forth in Section 4.1.2 certain appointive offices, such as Director of Emergency Management, Dog Warden, etc., and the offices described in Sections 5.3- 5.7.
6. Eliminate references to constables and special constables in the existing Charter.
7. Consider the possible amendment of Section 6.3.4 to provide that if the Board of Finance does not act on requests for special appropriations or transfers of funds within specified time, the result is an automatic approval.
8. Consider the possible amendment of Section 6.3 to provide that projects funded entirely by grants from the State of Connecticut which do not require an appropriation of town funds need not be approved by the Board of Finance or a Town Meeting.
9. Consider the possible amendment of Section 6.3,1 to provide that the current dollar threshold of \$10,000 for special town meetings be raised.
10. Consider the possible addition of an appointive officer named the "Operations Officer" to assist the First Selectman in the performance of his or her administrative duties.
11. Consider the possible amendment of Section 3.4.3 to eliminate newspaper publication when allowed by law and substitute electronic and website notice.
12. Consider the possible amendment of Section 2.5.4 to provide that an appointee to a vacancy in an elective office shall serve the remainder of the term that was filled.
13. Consider reinstating the Conservation Commission which will be comprised of members from both the Inland Wetlands Agency and the Commission for the Conservation of Natural Resources.

Note Mr. Salerno explained they may entertain other charges as well, which is part of the reason public input is so important; this is the first public hearing and they will have an additional one after the end of their work, and before they present their report to the Board of Selectmen.

Note Mr. Salerno explained that the Public Hearing will be followed by a brief Regular Meeting, and they will be forming subcommittees to review the tasks they've been charged with. The next meeting will start with the approval of minutes and public delegations, and the remainder of the meeting will consist entirely of subcommittee work, while the first meeting of next month will be a full commission meeting; this alternating meeting pattern will continue for the duration of charter revision meetings.

Note See attached schedule of Charter Commission Meetings for further reference.

 [Charter-Revision-Commission-Schedule-of-Meetings.pdf](#)

3. Public Comment

Note Mr. Salerno called for Public Comment.

3-1. Pat Larkin, 14 Oak Hill Drive

Note Mr. Larkin offered some of the following comments:

He's here to discuss item #3- "Consider possible amendment of Section 2.7 to provide four-year terms of Selectmen and two- or four-year terms of First Selectman," and item #10- "Consider the possible addition of an appointive officer named the "Operations Officer" to assist the First Selectman in the performance of his or her administrative duties."

He thinks before they take on both of these charges, they need to determine if we have the correct form of management for the town.

Is it time to look at utilizing a town manager as the town has grown and things have changed?

He believes that we need a person who's educated in town management and comes on board to give us a long-term vision versus a Selectman, which is a two year or four-year term.

A town manager would be a professional, have the proper education, have experience, and give us stability.

An operations manager would just be adding to the town without considering if we have the right town management.

In Connecticut there are currently over 30 municipalities that use a town manager, and they all have comparable populations.

3-2. Gian Lombardo, 2 Hillcrest Road

Note Mr. Lombardo said some of the following:

He's lived in town full-time for 11 years and prior to that, lived in Massachusetts for 20 years.

The town he lived in, in Massachusetts, had a selectman type system, around 2,000 residents, one-tenth of our budget, and each town meeting had a little less than half of the population in attendance.

The first selectman type system is ideal for these types of small towns that don't have the manpower; you don't have the people to participate in the government.

Here we have a population around 20,000 and an additional 10,000 during the summer months.

We have a budget of between 70 and \$80 billion.

If he was running a corporation, he would want employees that have experience managing that type of budget, and people in town.

We're still acting like we're a small town, and we're not a small town.

We need to move into the 21st century.

You need to do things to separate the policymaking and the administration of management.

for an elected position we're not asking for qualifications in professional management station.

Leave the policymaking to the people who are voted in and elected, and the management to professionals.

The first step is to admit that we need a better system of government.

3-3. Debbie Jett-Harris, 19 Center Street

Ms. Jett-Harris offered the following remarks:

She'd like to thank the Members for devoting their time to take a look at the Charter, which is in need of updates.

There are 169 towns in Connecticut and only 33 utilize a town manager.

She's not in support of moving to a town manager system.

She also doesn't support combining Planning and Zoning, and that's her perspective as a citizen, and not as a Member of the Zoning Commission.

Adding a full-time town manager would add a significant cost to the town.

She is concerned that other positions could potentially be cut to accommodate the addition of the town manager.

Perhaps it would be beneficial to use a part time manager or a part time consultant to assist where needed.

She does believe that the First Selectman does need additional help and Planning as well as Zoning is lacking in assistance as well.

There are many things that fall to the wayside such as blight.

She believes the Town could achieve the same results through the use of a part time manager or consultant, and at a reduced cost.

This type of part-time position in our state, pays roughly \$48,000 per year at this time.

This consultant manager or planner advises multiple towns and would not be in the town hall every day.

The average salary for a town manager is \$90,897, which doesn't include their benefit or bonus package.

Official town managers have contracts, and they don't work out, you would have to buy them out of their contract.

She noted that some nearby towns have struggled with this issue, which can easily be looked up.

It took the town of Clinton 5 years to remove their manager and they ended up adopting a part-time manager in conjunction with one of the part-time consultants she mentioned.

This option might better suit are town, and no alternate positions would need to be cut.

Personally, she likes the fact that we get to vote for our First Selectman.

It gives the voters the right and opportunity to select the leadership they feel is best.

Generally, she likes to vote for the offices we currently vote for, it gives residents the opportunity to see what a candidate stands for and choose accordingly.

She doesn't think our 18,000+ population should dictate this government structure change; any change made should be dictated by what people want their community and government to look like.

3-4. Anne Thurlow, 80 Smith Street

Note Ms. Thurlow said some of the following:

She's had the good fortune to serve on the Planning Commission, and she currently serves on the Zoning Commission.

There's an old adage, if it ain't broke, don't fix it.

She thinks it would be a mistake to combine the two, they are related but they do have different functions. Planning is more overarching.

They write a POCD that guides future development while zoning work is more concerned with the nuts and bolts of specific properties.

Her one suggestion is that it would be nice if the two committees could meet together once a year to discuss issues.

From a workload basis it wouldn't work to combine the two commissions.

When it gets really busy, each committee meets twice a month.

If you combine them, you're asking those people to meet probably every week for quite a few hours, which is a lot to ask for people who volunteer their time.

She thinks that elected positions should stay as they are.

If someone is appointed by either a small group or one person, people tend to do the bidding of whoever appointed them.

By voting for our officials, you get more viewpoints that reflect people's opinions on the things that are at stake.

3-5. Terence Donovan, 25 Woodbridge Road

Note Mr. Donovan said some of the following:

He agrees with the comments made by Ms. Thurlow regarding combining the Planning Commission and Zoning Commission.

With the current commission structure, you have more eyes on a project, which he thinks is a benefit to developments or applications that come to our town.

Both commissions having sitting members and alternate members, totaling around 16 people, who review these projects.

In terms of administrative services such as the Town Clerk, he agrees with making that a hired position, while the Tax Collector should remain an elected position.

For as long as he can remember the Town Clerk, be it Esther Williams or Karen Miller Galbo, they've always been cross endorsed, and a benefit to the town.

4. Adjournment

Note Mr. Salerno noted a brief Regular Meeting of the Charter Revision Commission will immediately follow this Public Hearing so they can discuss the subcommittees. He thanked the Public for their attendance and participation.

Decision MOTION (1)

Mr. McNamara moved to adjourn the November 1st, 2022, Public Hearing of the East Lyme Charter Revision Commission at 7:24 p.m.

Ms. Hogan seconded the motion.

Motion carried, 9-0-0.

By Respectfully Submitted,
Brooke Stevens, Recording Secretary