

Charter Commission Public Hearing

March 15, 2017, 7p.m., Council Chambers

Present: Josh Krintzman Chair, Rhanna Kidwell, Vice Chair, Bryan Barash, Jane Frantz, Howard Haywood, Anne Larner, Brooke Lipsitt, Karen Manning, Chris Steele

Approval of Feb 1 and Feb. 25 2017 Minutes:

Chris moves approval of the Feb. 1 minutes. Bryan seconds. 8 are in favor and 1 abstains. (Brooke).

Chris moves approval of the 2/15 minutes with one edit Josh raises (page 5). Bryan seconds. 9 are in favor and the motion passes.

Public Comment:

Councilor Marc Laredo, Councilor at Large, Ward 7, can go either way on some issues such as term limits. His comments will be about how the council would be elected (within our proposal). He believes the Council functions very well as a group of 24 but does understand that 24 members seems unwieldy at times. There is a wonderful attribute to the eight candidates who could be voted up or down. An individual can be voted for or against. That is fair and what democracy is about. He does not have a problem with “at-large”. His problem is with the other 4 seats. He’s not aware of anyone else in the Commonwealth who has the structure being proposed.

There are 3 features of the current system of ward representation he likes. First is accessibility. [The current system] is helpful when the 311 system fails. This will be lost with the new system - we are a large city and knowing an area is a big difference.

In terms of common sense running for office, it’s a lot easier to walk a ward or district seat than to walk city wide. It’s easier and less expensive.

The third issue is accountability. Voting candidates up or down is preferable to having a slate. He proposes replacing the 4 at-large and going to a district model so people are able to run from a district. It will still be a smaller body.

Jack Prior, Newtonville, is with “Newton Citizens for Local Representation” which is advocating for retaining ward councilors. He commends the process the Commission followed. He sees three negatives within the current proposal. It’s less accessible in requiring a city-wide run - Scott Lennon started as a ward councilor. The proposal limits people without city-wide name recognition. The slate component will be favored by those with special interests or from central organizations. This also reduces accountability of the councilors. Even with 12 councilors it is difficult to track where each councilor stands. Having a ward councilor represent views works better (or having a mix of the two) and the board should represent the diverse interests of the city. We also want people running head-to-head, even if a little less comfortable than “pageant mode”. Third, a significant amount of imbalance could develop. Right now each ward has balance with 3 people. With the new proposal, 5 people from one ward (likely an affluent ward) could dominate the board. This is most about his belief in direct representation. The proposal should be timeless and this seems to be determined by “the itch of the day” ~ housing and development. It’s messy but don’t engineer out the problems. He hopes the Commission will consider revising.

Ed Craddock, Ward 3, Craft. St., doesn't like that other people could vote for his representation. He doesn't want 7 other wards voting for the person to represent him.

Ernest Loewenstein - 57 Hyde St., Newton Highlands, appreciates the Commission's work and process. He recognizes Josh Krintzman for his leadership. His principal disagreement is with the reduction of the board and removal of ward aldermen. People in the city and The League of Women Voters dislike having 24 councilors. He does not see any real reason that 24 is too many and does not agree with Josh Krintzman's arguments in the Boston Globe article, and agrees with Councilor Laredo that elections should be head-to-head. However, he didn't hear that discussed [among Commissioners] - there was only discussion about the proposed number of councilors. All aldermen would run citywide, removing the local aspect that other speakers have addressed. The reduction of the board and removal of the ward aldermen throws the baby out with the bathwater. Local representation is the model in state and federal government. Removal of the local representation leaves the power with those who can raise enough money. This all played out with the background of city housing issues. Developers would have a lot more influence (than anyone else) on a reduced city council. He doesn't like it.

Councilor Jay Harney was not someone who runs for anything. There was interest in 2001 in his neighborhood, and so he ran against a 16 year incumbent for ward councilor. He knocked on doors and worked hard and lost by 27 votes, and ran a low budget campaign. It's a daunting task to run for office. As a ward councilor, he feels he knows everyone in his ward. He got to know a lot of people and won the second time he ran. The proposal will take away the opportunity for a lot of normal citizens to run for councilor in the easier role, and ward councilor is an important role. Boston and Waltham have 9 district councilors and 4 at-large. A lot of cities and towns place a premium on their local representatives. In this proposal, there is no ward councilor and the council is wholly elected at-large. 5 councilors could be from one ward. Do people really want that?

He does not agree that [council] meetings go on too long - they do when there are important issues. It's not been proven that this will be a good system, there is an effective government right now, and he does not support change for the sake of change. He works well with the other two councilors from his ward, and this doesn't make sense to him. He hopes we'll revisit the composition of the council.

Sue Flicop, 145 Florence St., on behalf of The League of Women Voters Newton thanks the Commission. They witnessed debate and thorough discussions on major and minor points, and decisions were revisited. Public comments were respected and a wide range of viewpoints were heard. The process was open and transparent and Commissioners interacted with people in a range of ways. The League will now evaluate the recommendations and in the upcoming months will decide whether they support the proposal.

Andrea Steenstrup, 21 Kimball Terrace, Newtonville, works on the campaign supporting the charter proposal but is speaking on her own behalf. She sees a unique opportunity to update the city government, which Newton voters have asked for. This is not a criticism of current officeholders. It is the structure that could use some change. A lot has changed since 1971 when the charter was last updated, i.e. computers, cell phones, email, the internet that help people do their jobs. A problem is how few people run for office. Having no term limits and such a large and confusing ballot has resulted in a low turnover rate on the city councilors. There needs to be a mix of institutional knowledge and fresh ideas. We also could be grooming people for bigger roles in our state and federal governments. The proposed changes (including size and term limits) will help encourage people to run~ most contested elections in the city are for empty seats. Having fewer councilors will have the council work better (i.e. 12 vs. 24 people at meetings) and make elections easier to understand. It will be easier to follow the councilors who would become more accountable to the voters. She likes the idea of being able to vote

for every councilor. Ward councilors only elected by a small number of voters (i.e. 500) are very influential with decisions that impact the entire city. She would relish the opportunity to vote for or against councilors, something she believes is her right as a Newton resident.

Marilyn Victor, 55 Morse Rd., Newtonville, appreciates the work that has gone into the proposal and feels she has come late to the party, but is here. She does not like the idea of losing a ward representative. Residents could feel distance(d) and less likely to pick up the phone to call someone about something troubling. The rationale as she understands from the report is that councilors have incentive to put parochial problems before [those] city wide. However, having a representative accountable to the ward is more important to her. Otherwise, everything else seems diminished. Under the proposal, the four elected at-large could represent the broader, city-wide perspective. Ward councilors would still be accountable to the citizens in the ward.

Marcia Johnson, 39 Bemis St., Newton, did not attend the meetings but followed the Commission's work. The process has been outstanding and a model to follow. She fully supports all aspects of the revised charter. After 16 years on the Board of Aldermen, she learned some things about its strengths and weaknesses. She would like to discuss two things, the first being structure. There is a principle of equal representation that ordinarily dictates all members of a body are chosen by the same, consistent method. This ensures each member has an equal voice and represents an equivalent constituency so power is distributed equally and equitably. 160 MA state representatives are elected from districts of about the same size. Newton has a "unique mashup" after its transition from bicameral to unicameral system and ward councilors (elected by ward) and ward-at-large councilors have an equal vote. However, the council's business impacts everyone as far as issues of taxation, spending, land use regulation, etc. Ward-only councilors cannot be held accountable for actions of others in the other 7 wards. She recommends removing this provision, and this does not have to do with people.

Also, organizations must apply principles of continuous improvement to ensure value-added work and this has not been the case. Approximately 8-10 years ago she and another councilor conducted a survey to determine how the Board might be more effective. There was no appetite to implement anything that came forward from this effort. Other organizations look to improve.

She supports what the Commission is doing, and encourages citizens to look at the work the councilors are doing, their agendas, committee work, etc. to become informed residents, citizens, and voters.

Councilor Deb Crossley agrees with what Marcy Johnson said and does support a smaller Council. She thanks the Commission for thorough work. She has been a Councilor for 7 years, active in the community decades before then, and is a former President of League of Women Voters Newton. She was president when the advisory ballot question revealed voter support for reducing the size of the board. She agrees some may have voted for that not fully knowing the work that done [on the Board]. However, over time she decidedly believes a smaller body would be more effective. More competition would be healthier during elections. A smaller body would be accessible to more citizens, and though current leadership has been effective reducing redundant committees, etc. she believes the council would meet more often as a whole. It is likely the councilors would be more uniformly and thoroughly informed when something comes to vote, and there would be less sending items back to committee, less of an iterative process.

As far as ward vs. at-large, she addresses concerns that there would be less accessibility without ward councilors. It is not uniformly true that at-large councilors spend less time responding to citizen complaints and concerns than do ward councilors, and she (an at-large councilor) does take up projects

and respond to citizens. It is not the case that a ward-elected person is more responsive to citizen concerns. If more equally informed, councilors should be willing to respond to citizens across the city.

Running for office and campaigning are hard, and running at-large is hard. Different wards can be walked strategically and it should be done to hear from range of people. She has had 3 contested elections and the first one she chose in challenging 2 sitting aldermen. She does not like raising money. However, you are able to do it because of your work over time. If you have more experience serving, you'll know more people which helps—but it's work.

As for accountability, she would rather have all representatives accountable to entire city. She agrees - why should there be 7 people on a body that people can't weigh in on? With the proposed structure, the workload could be reorganized and reduced, and she can share specific examples at a later date.

Councilor Barbara Brousal-Glaser, in 2nd term as Ward 3 Ward Councilor, wrote a letter to the Tab about a year ago opposing "getting rid of ward councilors" and agrees with colleague Marc Laredo that it is a terrible idea. The Commission and certainly the consultant did a lot of work. As far as Andrea's point about how few people run, needing to run at-large will not encourage participation. She does not agree that ward councilors are more parochial. She finds the Commission's references about trading votes troubling and has never seen this. Likewise, she spoke with Councilor Baker who has never seen anything like this. She finds this offensive that without any substance, that this term is being thrown around at meetings. As far as the parochial idea ~ she believes it is her job to look at the whole city, even though she was elected by and represents Ward 3. She never said, i.e. if something came up in Ward 8, "I don't care, that's not my ward". The other ward councilors, i.e. Alison Leary, Lisle Baker, Cheryl Lappin, also have concern for the entire city. They don't lose sight that they run from the ward to bring the perspective of the ward, but care deeply about the whole city. A lot of the work ward councilors do on committees reaches the entire city. She hopes we will listen to the citizens who want a councilor directly responsible to them.

Lorenz Glaser, 20 Auburndale Ave., Ward 3, respects Commission's hard work and efforts but hopes the group will hear and take back constructive criticism. The reasons his family got involved with politics was "hyper local". There was an opportunity to bring good judgment and direct representation at the ward level and views it as very important. He likes some of the ideas within the proposal, i.e. periodic re-examination of the charter, but does not support change for the sake of change.

He hasn't heard justification for many of the changes. He can't speak so well to reducing the size of the Council or to term limits. However, our whole system of government is built on the premise of local representation, so does not see the justification. If we get rid of ward councilors and have a unicameral body, direct representation is eliminated. At least we maintained this when we got rid of the bicameral body. We don't vote for every MA representative or every representative in our country. This will discourage access to government and decrease competition. He hasn't seen evidence or demonstration of what is broken that is being fixed. Newton has been a leader and progressive force in our country and he would hate to lose that. He signed the petition to form the Charter Commission but does not like the idea of losing direct representation and hopes the Commission will take his feedback.

Ramona Hamblin- 282 Linwood Avenue, is emotional and believes this is a time of unprecedented attacks on democracy and it is painful to feel her city is moving away from representation. She values ward representation and received immediate responses when she twice contacted her ward representative. She would not want to go through a list of 12 people to figure out who would address her ~ would try once or twice and then give up. She sat through hearings on development projects and felt listened to during the comment period, but [knew] the decision had been made. People would "get their

say and that's it" which may or may not be true, but that is how it feels. This [hearing] feels like more of that which makes her sad.

Constance Kantar, 382 Kenwood St., Newton, has long been against reducing the size of the city council/Board of Aldermen. The current proposed composition would drastically reduce access citizens have to elected officials of our legislative branch. When the original charter was formed in 1874, a bicameral system was established. There were six wards in 1874, a seventh ward was added in 1876, and an eighth in 1958. The charter of 1897 combined the 2 bodies into one, reversed the ratio of ward and at-large members, but kept the number of 24 aldermen. This number was not lightly recommended, and the population the Board served was much smaller and less diverse, and the issues to address less complex. However, there was a clear understanding that city-wide representation, and representation from distinct areas was very important, and this meant time consuming deliberation. Currently, Newton has a much larger and economically and culturally diverse population facing significant challenges like climate change, infrastructure and building, zoning, open space, etc.

The issues before the Council are complex and require much time to research and understand. A smaller council means fewer people would shoulder these responsibilities, resulting in less educated decision making. All councilors are not always available to research a problem, leaving a smaller number to take on the job. It is not wise to eliminate the ward councilor position. The ward councilor has a direct connection to voters, and s/he is the first person citizens turn to for assistance or to address complaints. All politics is local. In Newton, that means "in the ward". When candidates campaigns door-to-door, close relationships are built and this would be lost with only at-large candidates. Keeping the 16 at-large councilors enables the voices of a large, diverse community to be heard. The at-large councilors balance the often parochial views of the ward, sometimes reflected in the neighborhood councils, with a sense of what is most beneficial for the city as a whole. She recommends keeping the current structure. Additionally, we have term limits - called elections every 2 years. If someone is not performing, the person can be voted out of office. It takes a while for a person to become conversant with the many issues facing the city, so it is unreasonable to dictate that a councilor with important skills may serve a certain number of years. We should not aim for efficiency. If that were the case, we should aim for an oligarchy or autocracy. Let's not throw out what has worked for our city all these years. It is unwise to reduce the size of our city council.

Lynn Weissburg, 5 Alden St. commends the work and believes the research done has been beyond compare.

One of the purposes [of a new proposal] was to simplify Newton's voting process. The people in the room are informed, but most Newton residents do not know the basic facts of our city government, i.e. how many councilors, how they are elected. She predicts maybe 2 out of 10 could answer these questions.

She does not believe in the representation concerns charter [proposal] opponents put forward about the loss of ward councilors, and the argument is based on an assumption that is simply not true. People with constituent concerns do not reach out to ward councilors only. In her and others' experience, it is easy to contact the whole Council or 3 councilors from the ward through email. In her case, when reaching out to all 3, the least responsive was her ward councilor. The idea that the new proposal is less democratic is incorrect. A prior speaker pointed out that ward councilors can be elected with 600 or 700 votes, but has the same voting power as the other councilors which seems undemocratic. She does not

approve of the district model Councilor Laredo describes, 2 wards being combined into a district, with the districts electing a member of the council. She believes it would be very difficult to explain this new system of voting. A guiding principle of the Commission was to simplify/make it easier to understand how the city election works. This is best achieved with the current proposal.

Alicia Bowman, Ward 6, 19 Chestnut Terrace, believes the Commission engaged in research and discussion and agrees with the recommendations. A smaller board can think more strategically, which Newton needs. She has heard discussions that do not belong in councilors' hands but in those of paid professionals (i.e. engineering decisions about stop signs, crosswalks, parking spaces) and [the proposed structure] would free up the councilors to think more strategically. In 20 years living in Newton, her experience has been that the ward councilor has been less responsive and accessible than at-large councilors, even from other people's wards. It's easy for a sitting ward councilor to get a small base of 500 or 600 people and not work too hard, especially without a challenger. Our needs are driven by who we are, not where we live, i.e. those struggling financially, with young children, business owners, facing disabilities, etc. This drives the need for representation more than whether people live on the same street.

Therefore, every representative should be voted on by the whole city. A smaller board will be more strategic. There would still be representation, with at least one councilor from each ward. If that person is not responsive to you, then someone can run against that councilor. In her case, losing her ward councilor would not be a huge loss.

James Pacheco, 40 Circuit Ave., Ward 5, is thankful for ward councilors we need and have. Ward councilors look after residents' needs and more, not less, is what's needed. The ward councilors are grossly underpaid compared to other cities and should get a raise, which may bring about more competition in elections. He is a retired engineer and the Planning Department documentation is complex and can be confusing to the Council, requiring a lot of dialogue, but this is part of communication and our democracy. Our Executive Branch is good competition for the councilors. He enjoys all the villages of Newton and talking with a range of ward councilors. This should be protected as best as possible.

Councilor Susan Albright, 1075 Commonwealth Avenue, had initially been agnostic about the size of the Board, though she voted to form the Commission. She has done her own research and found an article done 2 years ago by a professional at UCLA/MIT who studied effect of representation in municipal government. He did not look at council size but at partisan/nonpartisan, at-large vs. district, term limits, ballot question or not, and Mayor vs. City Manager. [The findings were] that it makes almost no difference in City Council responsiveness to citizens. All the systems seem to work, so no matter what happens, there will still be a good form of government.

On controversial items, [Newton's] council feels too large and doesn't respect committee work. The structure is probably not working at this point, which argues for a smaller council. It must be hard to be a ward councilor. She did pay particular attention to her schools on the school committee [elected city wide with ward residency requirement]. When loud voices oppose something very good for the city, it must be very difficult for ward councilors - to vote with your ward and against the city. That does happen from time to time. She gives example of the neighborhood of the Cabot School and Cabot parents experiencing tension over the new school and she was in a difficult position, "for and against neighbors and parents who are all neighbors". It must be difficult to be a ward councilor but they do have a wonderful team in Ward 2.

In the end, she is supporting the proposal as the right way to go. Instead of the 4 at-large, could have had 4 district people also elected at-large from the district. For instance, maybe wards 1 and 8 could have been put together. The councilors would be elected at-large but would have a home base either from Ward 1 or 8. She wishes term lengths of [2 vs. 4 years] had been dealt with, as 2 years is tough always running for re-election, and believes staggering elections is easier on councilors and voters. Overall the work has been terrific and she does support it. She asks the Commission to please consider the district at-large folks (for the 4) for those who feel the impact of losing ward councilors. She thinks it would make a difference.

Lisa Monahan, 1105 Walnut St., Newton Highlands, very much supports the proposal. Her interest is not in ward-related issues, but in the city of Newton as a whole. The proposed structure is more appropriate than one with a ward focus, and councilors will come up with issues that are applicable city-wide rather than ward focused. She's lived here more than 20 years and no ward councilor has knocked on her door, and most of her experience with the Council comes from sitting in meetings past 11 or midnight. The 24 councilors often go off topic. A smaller board would be more nimble, more focused, and easier for the city to understand.

She does not think having a smaller board would affect opportunities to get involved in the city, though there would be fewer slots for office. There are plenty of other ways to participate. This is an opportunity to embrace change, though it is hard and people resist it. It's a long time since 1971. Change is good and will bring great new things to the Council to take this on.

George Mansfield, 312 Lake Avenue, Newton Highlands, served as a ward councilor but no longer holds the position. He regretfully cannot support the recommendations in the preliminary report. This will not be a surprise, as there was ample opportunity to share opinions formally and informally. He agrees the Commission's process was open and rigorous, and best efforts were put forward. Proposed changes he could support include those to financial procedures, planning and development, reaffirmation of neighborhood area councils, conflict of interest standards, provisions for public participation in city meetings, and a process for a 10 year charter review. He could even possibly support term limits, which would be necessary for the new council, which is the crux of the matter.

The proposed structure in time will change the way the city conducts its business and the structure and the nature of the city itself. If we like Newton now, it may be less attractive and livable in the future. The key change is the elimination of the ward elected councilors elected by and for the ward. From what he can gather, the proposal is based on two facts: 1) There have been two non-binding city wide ballot questions in support of reduction of the council passed by voters and 2) The size and two some extent the structure of Newton's council is an anomaly. Both of these are true. But why?

For #1: Did you research the context of the presentation of these ballot questions? Were they on the ballot alongside an ongoing, controversial issue such as the building of a new Newton North? Or maybe the majority of the voters were close to city issues, i.e during non mayoral elections years? One of these we heard tonight was on a state election ballot which is far removed from local issues. Especially in the latter case (and in many cases) people may vote without much thought in support of less government, perhaps believing this would benefit their pocketbooks. We've seen that in national politics and the result doesn't look very good.

Regarding #2, the current structure is an anomaly as is Newton in the state and much of the country. For instance, Newton has 8 distinct villages, no central business district or industrial areas. It's more like a suburban town than a city. The peer group towns studied included Revere, Medford, Haverhill, Malden, Waltham, Lawrence, Lynn, Brockton. He contends Newton is what it is because of its government

structure. If we change the government as proposed, there is a risk we will become like these other cities, which he says as a native of Quincy. Some also believe the proposed structure could lead to less diversity. With only 12 councilors, a plurality of councilors could come from one ward or village. He reads an excerpt from a memo (Collins Center to Karen Manning) in response to her question about the risk of slate formation (by residential area or special interest) with the 4 at-large pool. They responded slates could form, though more likely by area, and that no studies have examined this issue over time in MA. He would like the Council to look further into this because it is important.

Fred Arnstein, 7 Briar Lane, Newtonville, is very concerned about the issue of ward representation. He cannot imagine why there would be a recommendation not including ward representation. It's very strange. It would be as if in the U.S., all of us would vote for the representatives of Wyoming and for everybody, that there was nobody from a particular place who represented that place. He's astonished at the recommendation and took a look at the data on the website. There are 20 cities that were looked at including Newton, which leaves 19. He compared at-large vs. ward councilors in each city and he's surprised the Commission didn't consult the data on this point. Peabody has 5 at-large and 6 district, ratio 1.2. Chicopee has 4 at-large and 9 ward councilors, 2.25. Revere has 5 at-large and 6 district, 1.2. The ratio in Newton is .5 because there are 2 at-large councilors for every ward councilor which is the opposite of these other places. This is a completely different balance.

6 cities have no ward representation, but 68% have ward representation. The data does not support that the proposal is in the direction of common practice. Maybe these six cities are the best cities, which would be convincing, [but] the cities who do not have them are Tauton, Medford, Haverhill, Fall River, Lowell, and Cambridge. This does not produce evidence that having no ward councilors makes a city better than Newton already is. The data reflects this is an anomaly being pushed on the city of Newton.

Peter Harrington, 157 Lowell Ave, Ward 2: District Representation is a founding block of our republic. It is the issue that was settled when the country was founded. It was determined that district representatives would be incorporated into our government. If it hadn't, it would have failed and there would be no United States of America. Having a large legislative body has served this city very well. He has practiced law and dealt with city governments over 50 years, and Newton's is one of the most honest and hardworking governments in MA. Many problems other communities face do not affect Newton. He believes this is due to having so many councilors on behalf of a constituent.

Efficiency is not a hallmark of democracy. It is for someone who wants a single person or a few to run the government ~ they can be efficient because they do not have to debate or listen to opposition. Without district representation, minority ideas would never have a seat at the table. Over time, districts return people to office to allow them to voice opposition. In Newton, as he recalls, the argument for having 1 ward councilor and 2 from ward at-large (each ward) was based on theory that the at-large councilors provided 2/3 of the votes as the "responsible people" who could "move government along", and ward councilors would have 1/3 of the votes. The form of government is unique, works well and he urges the Commission to "scrap the idea of doing away" with all the ward councilors and half the at-large councilors.

Janet Taylor, 84 Highland St., has lived in Newton for 40 years and has worked as a volunteer on city and statewide issues. Currently she is working on local historic district project. There has been outreach to all the different councilors from the different wards. The councilors from the 2 wards for whom this is an issue have gone above and beyond and been incredibly responsive. She would hate to lose this. When the Continental Congress got together and there were 12 colonies, they could have had 12 or 24 representatives but instead had 56.

Nathaniel Lichtin, 53 Pinecrest Rd., suggests using “residents” instead of “citizenry” in preamble and “resident engagement” instead of “citizen engagement” in Article 9, Sec. 1. “Resident” should be used later in Sec. 9(1) as well.

He opposes the Commission’s proposal and is moved by Peter Harrington’s remarks. In looking at the Commission’s MA resident per councilor data, [and the new proposal] puts Newton at the bottom of the upper group. He recommends 16 councilors and be right in the middle for representation, at 5 1/2 or 6000 residents per councilor so people would feel more connected.

The at-large pool does not allow for one-on-one elections, and allows for “clumping” of city councilors in one portion of the city. This is not a good risk to take. On the efficiency questions, he would note the recent Boston Globe article about the Boston School Committee frequently meeting past 11 or midnight. It has very few members comparatively so this is not an issue of size, but its own rules of debate and discussion. He encourage rethinking proposal and going to at least 16 if not 24 councilors.

Jenn Abbott, 26 Whitney Avenue, applauds the efforts of the Charter Commission whose task was to undertake analysis of the current framework to see if another approach should be considered. The unanimous conclusion that a new structure would help our governance, and she strongly agrees.

She would like to focus on the changes to the city council, as these would be most impactful to Newton as a whole. There are only a number of ways a council can be reasonably structured and the group considered many of the possibilities. Each has its own pros and cons. For instance, with the current framework, there is much ward representation with 3 councilors per ward, and each ward can elect one representative directly.

However, voters have no say in [the election of] 7 out of 24 city councilors, nearly 30%. The votes of those elected by the ward have equal weight with those who have run city wide. Commission research shows that in recent years, turnover is down, open seats are declining. In the last 22 years, 74% councilor races were uncontested, with ward seats less likely to be unchallenged. One ward has had no contest since 1987. We can and should do better and Newton voters deserve a voice at the local level.

The benefits of the proposal: A reduction of the size of the council will increase competition and reduce anonymity to increase responsiveness, decrease length of meetings, and improve communication. The proposal has balance~ there is geographic representation (for the wards) without the redundancy of three representatives. At-large pools are common structure in local governments and offer competition, and new candidates would not have to go head-to-head with an incumbent from his/her ward. Each voter may have a voice in the election of the whole council. This is unlike the national or state level with inherent geographic constraints.

Term limits will provide competition/open seats and more opportunity for new candidates, and new voices [to join those] with institutional knowledge. City councilors have talked about the Council’s responsibility to do what is best for Newton as a whole - so all Newton residents should be able to choose all leaders. She would like to dispel some of the myths put forward by proposal opponents. It’s easier to run as a ward councilor? More people have chosen to run at-large than for ward seats. The have benefits of running at-large include meeting with people city wide, which helped inform their decisions as councilors. The current system may not be broken but it is definitely ailing. Thank you to the group for the courage behind the proposal, and she encourages people to learn about it.

David Stein, 29 Sylvan Avenue, notes that public service is often thankless and thanks from the community is a testament to the work that has been done. In 1860, Otto von Bismarck likened the

making of laws and legislation to making sausage. He and probably others have witnessed City council deliberations as messy and tedious as a sausage factory. However, sausages are at least linear which is not the case for some of the process and discussions that go on in the Council Chambers. This does not have the benefit of better quality output. With 12 vs. 24 councilors, there would be a leaner more efficient body politic, one that is no less representative or deliberative. “Gastric Stapling” proposed by the Commission will make for a less bloated, less wasteful, and healthier governance.

Eunice Feller, 104 Harvard St., Newtonville, voices her opposition to losing ward councilors. A lot has been said here about the good of the whole city, which some think the ward councilors may not focus on. Maybe in this age of email, texting, etc. the needs for ward councilors is obsolete. However, this city is made up of residents in the wards with unique needs. The councilors walk the same sidewalks and have children in the same schools - they need to “marinate” in the wards in order to truly understand its needs. She does not want to lose the human touch in our government.

Robert Gerst, 51 Claremont St., Newton mentions a clock downstairs honoring 2 of his friends for their service to the city. His concern is that in whittling away people, beautiful and valuable things are whittled away. Becoming smaller and more select means losing diverse voices which means loss of character and depth to this city. The council has been part of the “Newton miracle” and this is an exceptional city. This large, messy diverse board full of characters have sustained this city and we don’t want to stop that. His prepared remarks are as follow: Please retain the ward councilor position elected by voters of the ward. He has heard the concern that a small number of voters elect these voters, and he would like to draw attention to this compelling fact. If ward councilors are eliminated, the council will be less diverse, and those with non-prevailing views cannot be elected. Elected city-wide, only people holding majority views will ever serve. We benefit from hearing minority voices even when they do not prevail and without them, the city will be far less democratic than it has been and the city council will become an echo-chamber of like voices. He speaks knowledgeably about the subject. He was a Ward 1 alderman at large for over a decade. This makes him certain ward councilors help achieve what is best about our city. Ward councilors should and must remain a part of the city council, and many share his opinion. Voters may reject a charter that would eliminate the local voice from local government and he will vote that way too.

Sallee Lipshutz first reads from an email from Kathryn Winters (Waban Area Council) dated April 17, 2016, and describes “an alarming statement”: “At large councils have a checkered history in this country. They have been used to suppress minority representation and have been significantly challenged in jurisdictions with significant minority populations under the Voting Rights Act of 1965 (see Fayette County, GA for a recent example; California has its own Voting Rights Act that discourages at-large systems and has led many municipalities to adopt district representation). By contrast, district voting prevents 51% of the electorate from controlling the entire political process and can pave the way for increased participation among representatives of different socioeconomic backgrounds”.

Sallee Lipshutz, 24 Radcliff Rd, Waban, has attended and spoken at almost every meeting and acknowledges the open process undertaken in creating the proposal. There was a voter mandate to reduce the number of councilors on the City Council. The proposal fulfills that obligation which is commendable but how it was done is not. The Commission has struck a fatal blow to the ideal of local representation cherished by Newton voters with the elimination of their directly elected ward councilors. The 12 at large councilors, with a centralization of power, would not be accountable (specifically) to the voters of any particular ward. A ballot of all at-large councilors could easily enable a single-minded slate of candidates to be elected, either progressive or regressive, and not truly representative of our electorate.

Change should and will come to our city. Yet it should be controlled, deliberate, and yield positive outcomes for those who reside here, with special care for consideration of negative community impact. This will lower the wall that change and development must scale to be enabled. Only 9 councilors out of 12 at most will need to be convinced a project is appropriate within a given ward. Local voices will be stifled with no champions. Her preference would be 16 Councilors, 8 elected by ward and 8 city wide, and/then each voter would have only 9 choices at the ballot box. This would be an even greater reduction of voting choices for simplification, but would retain ward councilors, and allow for 16 voices to debate the issues thoroughly.

This commission has shown disregard for “very local representation” by removing neighborhood area council formulation from the charter and leaving the details to a much smaller city council whose time constraints would hinder the effective spread of these most local area councils. The area councils are proven assets to their communities and should be encouraged in the charter.

The Commission has removed power from voters by adding term limits for city council and mayor. If voters wish to retain a well-qualified councilor, the choice would be removed after an arbitrary term limit is reached. She disagrees with the rationale that these term limits are needed for equity with School Committee (8 year term limits). Having 12 year term limits for the mayor and 16 years for the City Council hardly achieves the stated purpose of equity.

3 arguments will defeat this proposal: Saving the beloved directly elected ward councilors, facilitating the spread of area councils throughout the city, retaining unrestricted voter power at the ballot box to remove or re-elect the Mayor and Councilors. Newton voters will resoundingly say no in November to this flawed charter revision that seeks to significantly mute their voices.

Gerard Slattery, Walnut St., Newtonville. He and his dad are in real estate and work in Newton and other MA towns. Reduction in the size of the Council either in terms of ward representation or at-large members would be a real mistake. He echoes what others such as Peter Harrington have said. The level of debate and engagement in Newton is one of the best they have ever dealt with. It’s a direct result of how the city council is constituted. The reduction would be a mistake because the wards are very different. Each of the wards has unique local needs, i.e. 6,7, and 8 vs. 1, 2, 3. At-large councilors have different interests, i.e. some are very engaged with zoning and others are not. They can focus their attention on areas most important to them. He thinks some of the ward councilors haven’t been challenged because they have done a pretty good job. It’s basic democracy that someone not performing will be challenged at the next election.” Doing away” with any one of these councilors would be a drastic mistake.

Susan Shepherd, 280 Islington Rd., Auburndale, and former resident of Newtonville, met Emily Norton when she knocked on her door one day. Emily has been a wonderful councilor and she would attend her coffees in Newtonville. It’s important to be able to speak with our representatives. She is very much against limiting the Council.

Helen Nayer is making her comments “post-mortem”. This Commission had an opportunity to make positive changes, such as balancing and equalizing the executive and legislative. Without taking a survey of residents and instead using expensive consulting, this commission decided to reduce the number of councilors. Let’s not discuss whether or not this was the right thing to do, because many think not, but instead discuss how this was done.

Typically, the simplest approach to solving a problem is usually the best or optimal approach. You probably are aware of “Occam’s Razor” - are you - perhaps not. The general principle is that a simpler approach is preferred to a more complex approach. In this case, the simplest most pragmatic approach would be to reduce one of the at-large councilors. This would have cut down the size and eliminated some troublesome issues. Yet, this Commission chose to eliminate the ward councilors. Why? It does not make any sense. The ward councilors are close to the residents in their ward as others have already said and understand the needs, wishes, and sensibilities of the people in their wards.

Eliminating them means disempowering the ward residents, ensuring their specific needs will not be heard. For instance, [ward councilors] are likely to block rampant, dense development when residents are against it, as is happening in Newtonville today. Many people are saying there is a positive connection between the Commission’s decisions and the drive toward dense development in Newton. The proposal will benefit developers and not the common good and residents.

Peter Bruce, Claflin Place, Newtonville: Lowell’s council is elected all at-large. The community is about half minority but has no minority representation. That is what we would have with an all at-large or quasi at-large system without ward councilors. Newton has bad voter turnout in municipal elections, i.e. only 20% of registered voters voted in 2011 and 2015. If you want more participation, the elections should always be tied to a mayoral election, with turnouts twice as high (as done before 1971). Concentrating representation in wealthier wards with an all at-large system will lead to even less turnout. He objects there is no power to recall the Mayor, an important check on politicians between elections.

James Pacheco, Circuit Ave., Ward 5, stresses the importance of having enough people to handle the work and do it correctly. A reduction to the size of the Council will lead to too much work and at 12, their council will want to be swamped as it has been in a past era. They’ll need assistance which will lead to a tax increase, so this is not a cheap deal and could cost “big bucks”. Don’t reduce ward councilors- we want more local representation. Don’t create chaos by doing this.

George Mansfield: Public hearings will take a long time no matter the size of the council if there is a high turnout for meetings.

He wants to come back to mention that he does not want to oppose the charter, nor object to what has been presented. Brief suggestions include:

Two primary objectives should be to simplify the election ballot and create one-on-one races for each seat.

Currently there can be 52 candidates, and the current proposal reflects a 19% reduction.

He suggests 2 other options:

1) Retain current 24 members, have staggered 4 year terms. On any 2-year ballot, there would be 8 at-large council positions and 1 ward seat, 9 positions total and a maximum of 18 candidates. Adding in the Mayor and School Committee (36) would create a ballot with 31% less than is currently proposed.

2) Have 16 Council members with a 4 year staggered term, 4 at-large positions and 1 ward seat, 5 positions on the ballot and 10 candidates for council on the ballot every 2 years. There would be 28 with Mayor and School Committee, 46% less than we face on the ballot today.

Please consider these options. Staggered terms which have not been discussed much lead to ballot simplicity. More costly city-wide campaigns would yield an offsetting bonus of a longer term. You pay more, you get more.

The next meeting will be on March 29.

The meeting adjourns at 9:15p.m.