

NEWTON CHARTER COMMISSION

Wednesday, April 13, 2016

7:00 p.m. – City Hall – Room 211

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

The meeting was called to order at 7:00.

Public Comment:

Councilor Lisle Baker, 137 Suffolk Rd.: Newton is an outlier in many ways and that makes it special. A large council has served the city well.

Ernest Loewenstein, 57 Hyde St: The Commission needs to define efficiency. Democracy is not designed to be efficient.

Matt Hills, School Committee Chair, 25 Hobart Rd.: 8 year term limits for the School Committee makes it an effective body. Term limits provide turnover and new blood on the Committee so he would like to see the Commission revisit this issue.

Don Ross, 211 Winslow Rd.: We should keep a 24 member City Council. It is easier to contact a ward councilor for constituent services.

Article 4:

Jane Frantz noted that the discussion about School Committee term limits focused on elections rather than on the impact the extension might have on the entire system. More importantly, the vote was 4-2-2 and it was not wise to let an important decision stand when it did not pass with a majority vote. She requested that the Commission revisit this item at a later date.

All Commissioners agreed to revisit the item at a future meeting.

Brooke Lipsitt raised a concern about the language in 4.1a “The school committee shall be the judge of the election and qualification of its members.” After a short discussion, the Commission decided to request feedback from the law department.

Article 2:

Howard Haywood began the deliberation of Article 2 by outlining the process of the review and the main issues. Rhanna Kidwell and Howard highlighted elements of the Article 2 Discussion Guide research, including the Model City Charter recommendations and the 5 specific scenarios for Council configurations.

Rhanna Kidwell suggested that each Commissioner speak to the issues in Article 2.

Jane Frantz: accountability to the voters was a top priority. Her preference was to look for a scenario that requires councilors to be accountable to all voters.

Brooke Lipsitt: her opinion about the size of Council has changed over time. When she was a member, she felt strongly that the Board size should remain at 24 members because the large number preserved access to a member of it. As electronic communications have improved, she thinks a 24 member Council is less critical. She thinks that 2 at-large Councilors run simultaneously is not a good idea. It does not encourage competition when have 2 incumbents run “against” a challenger. She said that she leaned toward a 4-year term.

Bryan Barash: initially he questioned the need for a Charter Commission, but he heard from many people who did not think the Council was working well. As he canvassed during the campaign, many residents commented on the size of the Council. After reading the model city charter and other articles on the subject, he was struck by how strongly the commentary favors a smaller board with at-large representation whenever possible.

Karen Manning: at-large by ward representation strikes an important balance for our city. She believes in term limits. The data is unambiguous and supports a smaller board. Newton is an outlier, and other cities have better systems to take care of business.

Josh Krintzman: residents have different conceptions as to the role of the Council. Constituent service is one role but the sense of Commission was that it was not necessarily the highest priority. He noted that there was no single right answer, debate is good, and whatever we do will be make some segment of the community unhappy.

Chris Steele: as a former candidate, he found that many people in the community misunderstand how the system works. For example, few residents know they can vote for 2 at-large Councilors. He said that a key priority for him was to create clarity about how the government functions and accountability for elected officials. While he wanted the Council to be elected by the city as a whole, he said it was important to ensure that each area of the city have elected representation so he supported Councilors at-large by ward.

Rhanna Kidwell: given her work on the signature collection, she would like to see change, but has been very committed to

the process of the Commission. She acknowledged arguments she has heard in favor of keeping 24 Councilors, but feels arguments in favor of downsizing are more persuasive. Voters have asked for a smaller Council on two occasions, and it's time to give them the option of a binding vote. Many current and former Councilors have advocated for downsizing, and it's clear that downsizing doesn't have to increase the workload. The current structure is unattractive to many potential candidates, and the length of the ballot is discouraging. The job of Councilor should not be different whether the individual is elected at-large or by ward.

Anne Larner: she was not part of the League initiative and had serious concerns about having a Charter Commission. Over the summer, she did a lot of reading on the subject and talked to many people. She heard a consistent message: that the complexity of the ballot and how the Council functions were serious concerns, and that at a certain point she had to really listen. She is much more concerned about effectiveness than efficiency. A lot of evidence suggests that a smaller Council would probably be far more effective. She is open to some truly at-large Councilors, but would like some at-large by ward Councilors.

Howard Haywood: a smaller Council would make the process work better. The responsibility of the ward and at-large Councilors should be the same. Votes are frequently political and it is possible to hide in a 24 member Council.

The Commission then discussed the composition of the Council. Rhanna asked each Commissioner to comment on or express a preference for the composition of the City Council (please see Article 2 Discussion Preview). The Commissioners

all preferred scenario D: A City Council with 13 members, 8 elected at-large by ward and 5 elected at-large.

Brooke Lipsitt: scenario D because she prefers a combination of at-large and at-large by ward Councilors.

Bryan Barash: scenario D. With 8 wards, a proper balance will require a larger number of at-large Councilors.

Karen Manning: scenario D, with 13 total Councilors.

Josh Krintzman: prefers all truly at-large Councilors, but in the end he leaned toward scenario D.

Chris Steele: scenario D.

Rhanna Kidwell: scenario D. She saw some advantages to scenario E, but thought it added a layer of confusion.

Anne Larner: scenario D. She liked parts of scenario E as well, but it seemed too complex.

Howard Haywood: scenario D.

Jane Frantz: scenario D, but she questions the best number of at-large Councilors.

After a discussion of the number of at-large Councilors, Howard Haywood made a motion to adopt scenario D with 5 at-large Councilors. (9-0)

The Commission began the discussion about term limits, but decided it was best to see some scenarios first and have time to think about them before discussing the item.

Calendar

The next article for review is Article 7 Planning. On May 4th, the Commission will hold a public hearing (Council Chambers,

7pm.) and hear testimony from a small panel of planning specialists from Newton and other communities.

On May 18th, the Commission will discuss the form of government as it relates to Article 3 and School Committee term limits.

The meeting adjourned at 9:25.

Documentation:



Article 2 Annotated



Article 2 Discussion
Preview



Article 2 Public
Hearings and
Meetings Press
Release



Article 2 Term Length
Scenarios (for
discussion 4/27)



Docket Item and
Memos from 2006 Re:
Reduction of Size of
Board (provided by
Councilor Lipof)



Docket Item and
Memos from 2006 Re:
Reduction of Size of
Board provided by
Rick Lipof



Staggered Terms
Transition
Description - Collins
Center

