

Wallingford Town Council
Charter Revision Commission
Public Hearing
Robert F. Parisi Town Council Chambers
Town Hall
45 S. Main Street
Wallingford, CT
May 26, 2016
MINUTES

PRESENT: Chairman Stephen Knight; Vice-Chair Christina Tatta; Mark Gingras; James Pyskaty; Jonathan Chappell; Gina Morgenstein; Samuel Carmody; James Seichter; Tom Corrigan; Patricia Kohl.

Chairman Knight called the Meeting to order at 6:33 p.m. and the Pledge of Allegiance was recited.

Chairman Knight explained the Public Hearing would take place prior to the commencement of its work. He had each Commission member introduce themselves and provide a small biography. Chairman Knight went over the guidelines and noted this hearing would be an opportunity for the public to present their recommendations to the Commission and noted this opportunity would not be provided at the Commission's workshops which he stated would be open to the public. He said written correspondence addressing the Commission's work as it unfolds was also welcome and said this correspondence could be addressed to the Commission via the Town Clerk, who could also provide an email address list. Chairman Knight said the Commission's charge deals only with revisions to the Town Charter.

Chairman Knight opened the Public Hearing at 6:38 p.m.

Public Comment

Barbara Thompson, 8 Autumn Leaves Road, current Town Clerk, said that prior to becoming Town Clerk, she was a 12-year Realtor, Chair of the Connecticut Real Estate Commission; a Registrar of Voters and a moderator at the polls for many years.

She commented on the hiring of the Town Clerk, pointing out that currently the Town Clerk is appointed by the Town Council majority and noted she is in her fifth non-consecutive term as the Town Clerk beginning in 2006. She said she doesn't agree with appointing the Town Clerk and after nine years in this position, she believes the Town Clerk should be hired as is other department heads, such as the Assessor, Tax Collector, Town Engineer, etc. and held to the same standards. She pointed out the Town Clerk's duties are varied and encompass assisting the public in locating their own land records or property maps; record property transfers from attorneys; record subdivision maps, single properties and easements; assist people in locating maps and with vital statistics, i.e., death certificates, marriage and birth certificates and dog licenses, and hunting and fishing licenses. Ms. Thompson pointed out she is also the Town Council Clerk and runs the Council office, deals with agendas and minutes and all ordinances. She said her office also deals with the elections, i.e., the absentee ballots and election night returns which she pointed out are now done electronically beginning this year and noted as of January, the birth certificates will be done electronically as well as death certificates electronically as of January 2017.

Ms. Thompson said there has to be some knowledge of computers and as Town Clerk, the hat is changed within a half of a second every minute of the day and have to deal with the public which is the number one customer. She said having a hired Town Clerk would ensure the maintenance of consistency in records management, with some records dating back to the 1600's.

Ms. Thompson said when a different Town Clerk is moved in and out of this office every two years, there is a different style of the way things are done and not always done consistency. She said the Town Clerk needs to be a manager and leader and to solve staff problems. Ms. Thompson said it is also important to be involved in the Town Clerk community, noting the State has one of the best Town Clerk Associations and noted she is the President of the New Haven County Town Clerks Association and is a member of the Legislative Committee and the Executive Board which brings a tremendous amount of information to her and helps her run the office. She said looking at 30 years from now; it would be better if the Town Clerk were a hired position to maintain all of the high qualities and standards and be part of the Association and get certified. She said the network she is in is very helpful. Ms. Thompson said the Town Clerk's office is the first place a new resident comes when they move into Town.

Ms. Thompson said the Town Clerk should be a hired professional job and should be treated as such.

Shawn Parkhurst, Assistant Supt. for Curriculum and Instruction, Wallingford Board of Education, presented the Commission with a handout of several recommendations. He recommended the Classified Service Eligibility for Medical Insurance and Pension be revised from 20 hours to 30 hours based on the standards established in the Federal Affordable Care Act; recommend revising part-time basis for not more than 20 hours to not more than 30 hours;

recommend revising persons employed on a temporary basis which is currently not to exceed three months, to not to exceed six months; recommend the revision of the Civil Service process to provide the school system the ability to hire classified workers without using the process so as to be better able to match the process required for the varied positions in the school district; recommend increasing the bid limit for products and services from \$7,500 to \$25,000 and \$50,000; recommend providing the ability to dispose of surplus equipment in a timely manner based upon the school districts' needs; recommend providing the ability to recycle electronic waste equipment without going through the Town's surplus process; allowing the use of the consortium or State bid process when time constraints are of the essence; recommended the replacement of the defined pension plan with a defined contribution plan for new hires.

Geno Zandri, 9 Balsam Ridge Circle recommended term limits for all elected officials for 10 year stretches where one serves for 10 consecutive years and then has to leave. He said after the break, the person could run after giving up the one term. Mr. Zandri said this gives other people opportunities and eliminates career people.

Donald Kennedy, Bull Avenue, said he moved to Wallingford five years ago but noted he has resided in 10 cities and towns, two countries, three states and two provinces, giving him a lot of exposure to different town governments and organizations. He agreed with the term limits especially on the Town Council and with the Mayor. Mr. Kennedy said this would change the Council and the Mayor and bring in new ideas to keep the Town progressive. He said by only having certain members of the Council and the Mayor stay in the same position for 20 or 30 years, is a good thing in many regards, but also a bad thing because this prevents new thinking. He said he also agreed with Mr. Zandri that if a term is skipped, a person should be allowed to seek elective office again. He encouraged the Commission to consider this idea.

Geno Zandri, 9 Balsam Ridge Circle, spoke about votes needed to override the Mayor's veto and the Public Utilities Commission's decisions. He said he would like to see a two-thirds vote which would make it six votes instead of seven, to override a veto. He said currently it is nearly impossible to override a veto or a decision of the PUC.

Donald Kennedy, Bull Avenue, recommended that a Town Manager be hired to run the Town noting that when an elected official is used, their experience is used but if that official is there for many years, the Town doesn't necessarily move with the rest of the area. He said the Town itself is stuck in the 1980' and 1990's because of limited technology and in order to manage, there needs to be technology because it will save money and will increase services. Mr. Kennedy noted that if the right Town Manager is hired, he or she will report to a combination of the Mayor and the Council and not just one individual. He said he doesn't like the idea of running by Committee because of possible discussions and arguments. He asked the Committee to consider hiring a Town Manager which would restructure the entire form of government but would be a positive aspect.

Geno Zandri, 9 Balsam Ridge Circle, recommended the Public Utilities Commission membership be increased from three members to five members. He said currently there are three commissioners appointed by the Mayor. He recommended if there are five members, two be appointed by the Town Council with recommendations coming from each political party to be approved by the Council. He said it is important that the Town Committees appoint someone which will truly represent the residents of the Town which he stated is not happening. He said they follow what the Mayor wishes them to do. Mr. Zandri said he would like to see two alternates on the PUC noting that if members are ill they cannot attend the meetings, leaving a shortfall. He noted P & Z and ZBA have alternates which sit in on the meetings and can take a missing Commission members place and should be appointed in the same manner.

Donald Kennedy, Bull Avenue, spoke about the budget process, which he pointed out in the current charter, is very tight, noted there is a six to seven week time frame in which the budget is presented and adopted. He noted the transparency and data issues, which he said is lacking in the budget process, and said he has been attempting since February to obtain financial information. He recommended the Commission look at changing the budget process to make it more transparent and encourage Townspeople to come in and listen to what is going on. He said it is difficult to understand three inches of paper when the information isn't available electronically. He explained when there is electronic documentation, a search can be done and items can be found. He said the budget period should be extended, and the budget documents should be released on March 1 to give the townspeople the opportunity to understand the numbers before the public comment. He said he believes the public lack of participation is because they don't understand what is going on and is not transparent.

Larry Morgenstein, S. Main Street, spoke about term limits. He said there are boards and commissions which for the most part function well. He noted Wallingford has approximately 47,000 residents and when one looks at these boards and commissions, one sees the same people serving on the same commissions for decades or they overlap. He said there may be approximately 60 people who run the town year after year. He said there is a pool of talent in town who would serve and add new ideas. He asked the Commission to consider term limits and hoped they would put this idea out for the people to decide.

Jeff Borne, 20 Sylvan Avenue, commented about the Town Charter and draft revisions shown on-line in red, noting Chapter 10, Land Use & Development. He disclosed he has been a 19 year member of the Conservation Commission and was also the Chairman for many years. He referred to Section 3 of Chapter 10 which refers to Environmental Planning noting that the Environmental Planner "shall serve as staff to the Inland Wetlands and Watercourses Commission and shall have such powers and duties as the Town Council may prescribe". He said there is no reference to the duties and the Environmental Planner provides to the Conservation Commission. Mr. Borne asked if this was accidentally left out or a misunderstanding, but noted when the Town hired an Environmental Planner, it was out of the insistence of the Conservation Commission which recognized the need of having a Town staff

person to do both IWWC and Conservation Commission which is mostly open space and management. Mr. Borne requested that language be inserted that the Environmental Planner shall serve as staff to the IWWC and the Conservation Commission.

Bob Gross, Long Hill Road, noted that a lot of the language in the Charter needs to be looked at line by line and fix up the Charter including the duties of many people in Town, who they report to, which needs to be cleaned up. He noted the Charter is not followed currently because it is outdated.

Don Kennedy, Bull Avenue, asked the Commission to consider that surplus funds be automatically be applied to next year's budget and not spent or appropriated in the manner of which they are currently being appropriated and spent. He said he believes there is a history in Town of creating a budget which is high on expenses and low on revenue where there is always a surplus and the money is appropriated the last month of the surplus year which he said is not appropriate. Mr. Kennedy said this money should go back to the taxpayer and towards the following years' revenue.

Bob Gross, Long Hill Road, spoke about referendums and recommended the number be lowered from 20 to 15 with a charge that the Council has to have a minimum number of polling places open. He said the way it is currently written, there can literally be one polling places. He noted there has been several thousand people participating in a referendum. He said there should be ease of voting in a democracy.

Larry Morgenstein, S. Main Street, spoke about the changing from every two years to every four years for Board of Education, Town Council and Mayor Elections. He went on the record stating that he would like to see this stay at two years because of accountability to the electorate and has worked well.

Bob Gross, Long Hill Road, said he agreed with Mr. Morgenstein regarding the two year election except with the Board of Education, noting there was discussion of three-year terms. He said this is an intense job and a minimum of three years would be more beneficial. He said if the Commission takes up the surplus, there should be a percentage (possibly 70% to 80%) and noted at least the majority of this money should be put aside to set off the balance for the next year.

Mr. Gross asked about a timeline of when the Charter would be completed. Chairman Knight said there have only been a few meetings to set a schedule and discuss leadership. Mr. Gross asked if there would be another public hearing. Chairman Knight said this would be the only opportunity to have an audio/video voice, but noted written comments would be considered. Mr. Gross hoped that when the Commission was two-thirds of the way through the Revision, another public hearing would take place. He noted the sparse attendance at tonight's meeting. Chairman Knight said Mr. Gross's suggestions would be taken into consideration.

Chris Digenova, 25 Birch Drive, said he was pleased with the Town government formulation. He said he didn't like the direction the last Charter Revision went, and asked this Commission to review the mistakes.

Jennifer Morrison, Cooper Avenue, asked if there would be another Public Hearing because of tonight's low attendance. Chairman Knight noted this request.

Bob Gross, Long Hill Road, hoped the Commission would be open to put as many items on the ballot as the public would like to see and let them vote on this. He said the issue in the 2009 Charter Revision was the Town Clerk should have been a civil service position and noted groups of people came out and defended the position of the Mayor. He said the Charter Revision document should be taken in a way that makes the Town run better and for the betterment of everyone in the community, not for just one person. He said there should be checks and balances in the system.

Chairman Knight closed the Public Hearing at 7:20 p.m. and thanked the people for attending. He said all suggestions and recommendations would be taken into full consideration. He noted that the Commission has scheduled several meetings in Room 315 at 6:30 beginning on June 16; June 23; July 7 and July 21. He said no agenda for these meetings has been determined.

Adjournment

Mr. Gingras made a motion to adjourn the Meeting at 7:21 p.m. Mr. Pyskaty seconded the motion which passed unanimously.

Respectfully submitted,

Cynthia A. Kleist

Recording Secretary