



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 1, 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 1, 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, Leo Martin, James Mello, and William Oates. Also present were Christopher McClure, Chief ITO, and Michael Ward, Director of the Collins Center. Jonathan Hecht was absent.

2. Review and Discussion of the [Memo and Materials Presented by the Collins Center](#)

Mr. Ward, Director of the Collins Center, described many of the documents provided to the Committee: documents related to appointed versus elected boards; charters that addressed questions raised with the caveat that some are relatively new; and data regarding forms of government for comparable communities. He stated more documentation is being prepared. He stated the Committee could start discussing the desired form of government. In January, there would be a panel who could discuss different types of government. The goal is that in March, the Committee would determine the type of government suited for Watertown.

He felt the major questions that arose from the past meetings, were transparency and communication; responsiveness and accountability; legislative capacity and the

balance of power between the legislative and executive branch of government; and a vision for government.

In discussing the communication and transparency and the responsiveness and accountability issues, these matters were raised:

- There is a need to determine how much of the issues are related to the form of government and how much to the administrative needs for the Town
- A concern was raised about matters being done in public versus those done behind closed doors of which the public is unaware of
- The charter needs to address who is responsible for governmental functions. The public is currently uncertain as to whom they should contact; responsibility for governmental functions seems to be constantly shifting between the Town Manager and the Town Council and as a result the public does not know who is the decision maker
- In a mayoral form of government, the public knows who the decision maker is and the mayor can be removed for what the public perceives as inability to be responsive; if the current form of government is retained, lines of responsibility need to be further defined and strengthened
- Councilors also have concerns about openness because they often do not have the information required to inform the electorate; additional powers and ability to override actions are needed
- Other Councilors felt they have had the opposite experience of obtaining whatever information was requested. The lack of transparency does not relate to the discussion of the form of government. Transparency issues will be concerns no matter what the type of government is in place
- To provide better communication, the Town needs resources. The Town is changing and there is more activity and development occurring in Watertown; other communities have people who serve as spokespeople or #311 lines for calling in basic complaints in their neighborhoods and more.
- The #311 is usually used on larger communities due to the cost of the service.
- The issue seems to be constituent services. There needs to be a way for constituents to call and receive service. It should not be incumbent on the constituent to know where to go, it should be a matter of the constituent calling and being provided service.
- Constituent calls serve as the eyes and ears of the Town; people become more responsive when they are serviced
- The Charter does not address the tasks of communication. The Committee needs to discuss if a mayoral form of government would provide more public input in the role of government. The mayor is the chief executive with the City Council often being the rubber stamp of the mayor. In a Town Council format, the Town Council sets the policy that the Town Manager administers. The Council plays a larger role in the budget as it relates to public policy.
- Communication comes in two parts: the provision of information and the broadcasting of that information. Other charters provide for such activities: the Town Council President providing a State of the Town address; the Town Manager and the Town Council President providing such statements biennially; and open meetings for the public to ask questions of the Council. Broadcasting of the information is the second part of the problem that needs to be addressed.
- There are pluses and minuses to both the Mayor and the Town Manager. Budgets for the Town Council are prepared by the Town Manager and often it seems the Town Council does rubber stamp them. Mayors are more accountable because they need to be reelected; one expects transparency from a Mayor; and Mayors offer initiatives to be responsive to the public. No matter what form of government is decided upon for the Town, the matter of communication and accountability can be addressed in the Town Charter

- There appears to be a lack of standards for communication between the Town Manager and the Town Council. The standards can be written into the charter. Watertown's current charter does not have strong language regarding the bounds of the Town Manager and the Town Council. (Council President Sideris stated that this should be a matter that is addressed in the revised charter.) Another idea mentioned was to determine if the staffing has the right skill set for their positions.
- The Committee needs to look to a vision of what the community would be like in 10 years. Currently the vision is expressed through the budget.
- It was suggested that full time salaried Council members could serve as a way to improve communication between Councilors and the community.

Council President Sideris then took questions from the public.

Elodia Thomas 67 Marion Road - Stated that both the Town Manager and the Town Council are responsible for being accountable to the community. She felt that the #311 line would provide data regarding issues and where incidents are occurring. The Town Council's Public Forum does not provide answers to the citizenry's questions. The Charter Review Committee has no minutes to post. Town Council Committee meetings are very difficult to locate. There is a need for memos to a Councilor's constituency.

Jackie Van Leeuwen – 27 Whites Road - Raised the concern that this not be just a meeting where people raise grievances without taking any action. She felt there has to be a process created to address the matter in the Charter.

The Committee discussion continued:

- A point was raised about part-time Councilors hiring Assistants. Several towns allow for the hiring of staff that is not restricted to clerical staff
- There are limited resources that the Town Council has at its disposal. An item of consideration is the hiring of a Town Attorney. The turnaround time is often long when using a law firm.
- The Charter should address the requirements for a Town Manager so as not to restrict qualified applicants for a position and to clarify the Town Manager's responsibilities.
- The Town needs to look how the Charter will affect matters in the future. A suggestion was made that perhaps the review should be completed every five years to keep abreast of changes.

Council President Sideris opened the forum to attendees and to a question and answer period:

- Transparency is needed. For example, if the Police Chief chooses not to consider a matter, there is no change
- The power structure is confusing; the Town Manager needs to be more visible and accessible
- An annual statement of the Town is needed.
- Annual evaluations need to be used to allow for information, such as the report of complaints made to a department
- Where are complaints lodged and who holds the Town Manager accountable. Council President Sideris stated the Town Council is the body that holds the Town Manager accountable.
- What surrounding towns have a communication, equity, diversity position
- How can the Charter address the issue of racism and equity
- While communication has improved over the years it still does not meet current needs
- There is a need for meeting minutes
- Residents feel they are being ignored

- Longevity in a position can keep one in a culture biased frame of mind
- How is the Committee reaching out to those who cannot attend the meetings

At the end of the discussion, Mr. Ward agreed to set up a panel of speakers from various town government types.

3. Establishment of a Communications Sub-Committee

Council President Sideris appointed Marcia Ciro, Leo Martin, Anne Fitzpatrick, and Councilor John Gannon to the Committee and requested Ms. Ciro to act as the Chair. He also mentioned the Town Manager's quarterly newsletter in the tax bills should include a blurb about the purpose of the Charter Review Committee. Although this only would be sent to home owners, it is an initial opportunity to reach out. When asked if there was a budget for the subcommittee, Council President Sideris stated that there was none but that a specific request may be made for funds.

4. Request for an [Extension for Charter Review](#) from the Town Council

In the closing comments:

Tiffany York - 114 Riverside Street - Requested an expansion of the contract with the Collins Center to provide professional assistance to the Committee.

Mr. Mello moved a request that the Town Council extend the Charter Review Commission until the end of June with the proviso that another request would be made later if needed; Councilor Palomba seconded the motion. The motion was adopted unanimously on a roll call vote.

5. Next Meeting

The next meeting will be held on December 15, 2021.

6. Adjournment

Councilor Piccirilli moved to adjourn; Councilor Feltner seconded the motion. The motion was adopted unanimously on a roll call vote. The meeting adjourned at 8:02 p.m.

Minutes were prepared by Marilyn W. Pronovost.