

BLOOMFIELD TOWN CHARTER REVISION COMMISSION

There was a regular meeting of the above referenced subcommittee held on Saturday, May 25, 2024, at 3:00 p.m. in Council Chambers at Bloomfield Town Hall, 800 Bloomfield Avenue, Bloomfield, CT.

Commission Members: Joseph Suggs, Chair, Dwight Bolton, Elvin Turner, Bradley Klein and Erica Coleman (via phone)

Others present (in-person): Mayor Danielle C. Wong, Councilor Kenneth McClary, Attorney Lawrence Widem, Crumbie Law Group, LLC, Dawn Dickenson-Kerr, Activities Specialist

Virtual Attendance: Councilor Todd Cooper

Absent: India Rodgers, Clerk of Council

The meeting was called to order at 3:05 p.m.

In the absence of the Commission Clerk, these minutes were transcribed based on the Zoom recordings and audio transcript.

Public Comments

In-Person:

1. **Suzette DeBeatham-Brown, 25 Fairfield Lane** sent her written comments (see attached) prior to this meeting via e-mail to the Commissioners. She commented on her surveying of surrounding towns for statistical data relative to the Election of Mayor and Council compensation. In her findings, Mrs. DeBeatham-Brown stated that the Election of Mayor is through general election and held at-large and not elected by districts. She also noted that regarding Council compensation, there are only a couple of towns that provide stipends to their elected Councilors on an annual basis. Mrs. DeBeatham-Brown is of the sentiment that if one elected group is selected to receive compensation that all elected officials should receive the same. She mentioned that all are volunteers and willing to give up valuable time that cannot be replaced to serve the Bloomfield community.
2. **Robert Berman, 8 Hiram Lane** mentioned that he sent initial comments into the Commission in April prior to receiving their official Council charges, which are somewhat aligned with his recommendations. Mr. Berman commented on changing the number of Councilors from 9 to 10 with four-year terms, every two years elect 5 Councilors. No party will be able to nominate no more than 3, citizens would be able to vote for any 5 Councilors. This would give continuity and could still have turnover as needed. In addition, Mr. Berman mentioned the position of the Library Director. He noted that this position is no different than any other senior staff position reporting to the Town Manager. He also noted that he did some research regarding this position and how appointed in other towns:

Library Board of Directors/Trustees: East Granby and Avon

Town Manager/CEO: Enfield, Simsbury, South Windsor, Granby

3. **Frank Merblum, 13 Butternut Drive** commented on the town charter section focusing on referendums. He noted that there is a need to have language in the town charter that references a town budget referendum for both the Town and Board of Education. He is not in agreement with having nine Councilors decide on how much his taxes should be. In his research, Mr. Merblum noted 46% of Connecticut towns have budget referendums.

Councilor Kenneth McClary commented on the lack of Council interest to change the current form of government, Council-Manager. He strongly encouraged the public to take an active interest to come out and be engaged in this process. There are a variety of ways to participate by attending regular Commission meetings (flexible weekend meeting hours), e-mail and online form.

Virtual:

1. **Dr. James Biffer, 17 Terry Plains Drive** commented on some misinformation shared with Commissioners regarding Library Services. He cautioned them to review and speak with specific town departments before making a final recommendation to eliminate or change what they perceive to be reporting authority. It was noted that the Library Services department has always reported to the Town Manager. The Library Board of Trustees have nothing to do with the Town budget, they only control programming and the library collection. Dr. Biffer expressed his disagreement with changing Council terms of office from 2 to 4 years. He noted too much chance for abuse of power without a recall provision and voting districts.

Councilor Todd Cooper thanked the Commissioners for their hard work and due diligence in updating our Town Charter, by providing flexible and ease of access for public participation. He also commented on the overall overview of Council charges to be discussed and reaffirmed the Council's commitment to undertake this revision process that is long overdue.

Review and Discussion of Council Charges to the Commission

(Chapter 2 – Election of Officers, Section 201 (Elections), Section 205 (Voting Districts and Chapter 3 – Section 301 (The Council)

Chairman Suggs introduced the Council charges for Commission discussion included: Chapter 2 – Election of Officers, Section 201 (Elections), Section 205 (Voting Districts) and Chapter 3 – The Council.

Chapter 2 – Election of Officers

Council Charge: Potentially adding language for training opportunities with all elected boards and commissions, i.e. sexual harassment, code of conduct, etc.

There was a brief discussion regarding the need or requirement for such training for all elected board and commission members. The consensus of the Commission was to refer this topic to the Town Manager for

administrative oversight to offer such training through the Human Resources department for board and commission members. This is not a town charter issue.

Section 201 (Elections)

Council Charge: Terms of Office for Elected Officials – Staggered terms

The current term of office for Town Councilors is two-years. The Town Plan & Zoning Commission and the Board of Education have staggered terms of 2 to 4 years respectively. It was noted that it is critical to have consistency, stability, and some institutional knowledge that should carry over from one term to another term. It was recommended to leave the term of office for TPZ to consistency in understanding the historical perspective of a commissioner is important because there are precedent setting decisions that occurred in the past that would be applied to new applications that come before the TPZ. The Town Plan & Zoning Commissioners have required training provided by the State of Connecticut to foster in-depth knowledge of complex rules and regulations permitted under state law.

The Commissioners would like to continue with further discussion and review of terms of office for the Board of Education and Registrar of Voters. There was some discussion regarding the need for staggered terms with both entities. It was noted of the importance to have stability and institutional knowledge to share with new members.

Commissioner Klein clarified what this would mean for the Council, if there were to be staggered terms, we very two years, then Council would have an election held every year. However, it was noted that this would be recommended for Town Council elections. By considering staggered terms for Town Council, this would undermine cooperation on the Council to select a mayor, which the current standard is highest vote getter becomes Mayor. He noted that the two-year terms are consistent with the support of political parties running endorsed or challenging slates. This makes sense in an electoral capacity.

Election of Mayor

Currently, the traditional process to select the mayor is by the highest votes and majority vote of the Town Council. It was noted that there are some benefits with a direct election of the mayor by the citizenry. An individual can make an informed decision whether to select that person or some other candidate by the Council. The Commission recommended that the selection of Mayor should be the majority vote of the Council. The language should reflect this change and the highest votes assume the role of Mayor and title.

Attorney Larry Widem of Crumbie Law Group, LLC commented and listed details of each of the three models of municipal government: Strong Mayor, Elected President of the Council and Highest Votes (Council Selected). The current town charter does not include having the mayor be a tie-breaker for voting.

Registrar of Voters

There has been some public comment about considering changes in terms of office for the Registrar of Voters from 2 to 4 years, to also provide continuity and institutional knowledge to be shared on how to run a municipal

election and the new requirements of early voting. There was a consensus of the Commission to consider changes to a 4-year term of office for the Registrar of Voters with the next election.

Section 205 (Voting Districts)

Council Charge: Review of Voting Districts

The Commissioners discussed the advantages and disadvantages of voting at-large or by voting districts. This language is currently not in the town charter. It was noted and recommended that there should be clearer language to indicate that the Council will be elected at-large. In addition, there was detailed discussion regarding minority representation, the differences between voting at-large or by districts, voter convenience to be considered.

In 2002, the Town of Bloomfield went from 6 to 5 voting districts per redistricting requirements from the State of Connecticut. Commissioner Suggs shared some voter registration estimates per district:

- District #1 - 1,800
- District #2 – 4,501
- District #3 – 3,677
- District #4 – 3,782
- District #5 – 3,791

The cost to operate each district for an election is approximately \$32,300. There was some discussion regarding potential cost savings if there was a reduction in voting districts. It was mentioned that this decision should not be solely on cost savings, if voters are shifted to other voting locations, that district will need more resources, staffing, etc. to accommodate the additional flow of traffic. In addition, there are some new added costs due to early voting requirements by the State of Connecticut. It was recommended to have both Democratic and Republican Registrar of Voters come to a Commission meeting to clarify how our current voting districts were derived.

Mayor Wong clarified that the lines are drawn from a state standpoint by population, not by the Registrar of Voters. So, if the voting districts were to alter as they stand today, that will not impact the state, how the lines are drawn from the state, the house seats, and things of that nature. They are not correlated.

Chapter 3 – The Council

Council Charge: Potential change of language regarding compensation

Chairman Suggs mentioned that he made a request for staff to research with the Connecticut Conference of Municipalities (CCM) for data regarding Council compensation benefits in surrounding towns and throughout the State of Connecticut. Through his own initial research, the following towns were surveyed for this data:

- Avon – None

- Windsor – None
- Granby - None
- South Windsor – None for Councilors, Mayor receives \$75.00 monthly stipend, plus any incurred expenses for official duties
- Simsbury – None for Councilors, First Selectman receives \$10,000 annually

Chairman Suggs asked the Commission if this provision should be eliminated as a prohibition, not necessarily deciding on whether Council should or should not receive compensation. The Commission will receive additional data from staff for further discussion and review prior to making a final recommendation on this charge.

APPROVAL OF MINUTES

It was moved by Commissioner Bolton, seconded by Commissioner Turner and voted unanimously to approve the minutes of May 16, 2024, subject to change in adjournment time from 7:10 p.m. to 8:10 p.m.

ADJOURNMENT

The meeting was adjourned at 4:45 p.m.