

Public Hearing Comments – Town Charter Revision Commission – August 21, 2024

The public hearing opened at 7:05 p.m.

This public hearing is to solicit public input regarding the proposed revisions to the town charter as approved by this commission.

Public Comments

In-Person

1. **Robert Dickinson, 400 Seabury Drive** inquired about public participation at public meetings. He noted that he was not sure if it would be appropriate to include some language in the Town Charter. He suggested reading all letters sent in for public comments during the meeting. Mr. Dickinson also commented on minority representation on town boards and commissions.
2. **Gail Riley, 8 Maple Avenue** suggested changing the title of “Mayor” to “Chairperson”, which would be consistent throughout all town boards and commissions. She noted that the “Vice-Chair” could be voted on by the Town Council.
3. **Lenelle Suharto, 70 Prospect Street** inquired about the suggested language to change the library structure. She asked for the reasoning behind the suggestion.
4. **David Baram, 5 Warbler Circle** congratulated the Commission on a job well done thus far, in identifying some meaningful changes, but in rejecting other changes that could have been contentious and divide the community. Mr. Baram commented on the following topic areas of suggested revisions within the charter:
 - Fire Departments – The current recommended language violates state statute and charter.
 - Section 308 and 906 – reduced the petition signatures to 4%, this recommended change is too low, new recommendation to 5%.
 - Assistant Town Attorney – expressed concerns over being from the same firm “wording”.
 - Town Manager – may assign as many employees to each department as appropriate, must have Council approval, change language to “Town Manager will recommend through the budgetary process” to assign more employees.
 - Finance – second signatory to checks – should be appointed by the Town Council and have some financial background.
 - Votes for Referendum – state statute states that anyone who owned real estate valued at \$1000 or more has a right to vote, is this defined in the charter?
5. **Rickford Kirton, 7 Hickory Lane** thanked the Commission for the phenomenal job to this point. He requested the Executive Summary of charter revisions prior to tonight’s meeting. Once posted to the town’s website, the draft document is inconsistent with what was discussed by the Commission. The document still has errors that need to be corrected and is not ready to be forwarded to Council because it’s incomplete.

Mr. Kirton also expressed some concerns regarding the residency of the Town Manager required in the town charter. He encouraged the Commission to keep the current language requiring the town manager to live in town. Mr. Kirton asked the Commission to review the entire town charter and address public input issues and concerns as well as Council charges. He urged the Commission to not refer this current draft to the Council and to continue to do the work.

6. **Attorney Michael Collins, 225 Asylum Avenue, Hartford, CT (Representing the Bloomfield Center District)** is legal counsel for the Bloomfield Center Fire District regarding the proposed revision to the charter which addresses the fire protection service. He expressed concerns about the proposed revision appearing to confuse the relationship between the Town and fire districts. Attorney Collins noted that the fire districts are separate, independent municipalities, the town does not have the authority to abolish the districts or rearrange them, reconstitute them in any way. It was also noted that the statutory mechanism by which fire districts can be terminated. The fire districts would initiate that process. No action by the town can do that. Current charter language recognizes that distinction prospective fire division would only appear to happen if a fire district is eliminated.
7. **Attorney Kevin Deneen, 20 Maple Avenue, Windsor, CT** reiterated all points given by Attorney Collins. He noted that there was no intent to change any language in the draft post, maintain the current system for fire services.
8. **Suzette DeBeatham-Brown, 25 Fairfield Lane** thanked the Commission for the work they have put in and for providing a space for residents to get out and speak their thoughts. She commented on the true intent of the Council once the Commission draft proposed charter revisions are received and reviewed for additional feedback from the Council. Mrs. DeBeatham-Brown noted that it is disingenuous to receive payment for giving back to the community, it should all be volunteerism. She also commented on several other topics areas in the town charter:
 - **Election of Mayor** – Option #1 – Separate election or Option #2 – Highest vote getter appointed as Mayor elect and second highest vote getter appointed as Deputy Mayor elect.
 - **Section 609 – Social & Youth Services** – remove “responsibilities shall also include other responsibilities as determined by the Council; this responsibility should be given to the Town Manager.
 - **Section 605** – remove any reference noting the Council, when assigning duties or responsibilities, should be a Town Manager function.
9. **State Representative Bobby Gibson, 5 Greenbriar Drive** commented on the current timeline for project completion. He recommended a thorough review of the town charter and request the timeline to be extended.
10. **Renae James, 23 Mayfair Road** inquired about data statistics or comparisons with other surrounding towns regarding compensation of elected officials and residency requirements for the Town Manager.

11. **Lynette Grande, 18 Cliffmount Drive** informed the Commission of some research she did regarding “strong mayor” role in CT towns, out of 169 towns, only 5 towns have strong mayors, who are engaged on a different level with larger populations and extensive partnerships with the State of Connecticut.

12. **Sydney Schulman, 8 High Ledge Road** commented on several topic areas of the town charter for consideration of revision:

- Town Manager – Residency requirements – should live in town, however, with some exception would consider living in surrounding towns. He encouraged the Commission not to remove the current charter language.
- Votes for Referendum – cautioned the Commission on reducing the referendum threshold, could potentially lower accountability and transparency with the community.
- Council compensation – should not be paid, civic duty and engagement should be top priority in volunteerism.
- Election of Mayor – Leave as is, current system is working, old tradition – highest vote getter would be appointed as Mayor.

13. **Joaner Wideman, Park Avenue** inquired about meeting notifications and encouraged the Commission to consider surveying the community regarding the Town Charter Revision process.

Virtual

1. **Councilor Cindi Lloyd** thanked the Commission for taking the time out of their busy schedules to do this work. She also thanked Chairman Suggs for spending time to explain the process and gain a greater understanding of the issues. Councilor Lloyd thanked all who came out to speak regarding Charter Revision and encouraged all to stay engaged.
2. **Carl Delmolino, 25 Beaudry Lane** thanked the Commission for their time and dedication to this process. He agrees with rejections suggestions for Election of Mayor and Council compensation. In addition, he recommended a higher threshold for referendum petitions from 4%, should be at least 5%. Mr. Delmolino expressed concerns regarding the Commission timeline for completion is way too short. There is not enough time for community engagement, education, deliberation, and further review of charter items that are not a part of the Council recommendations.
3. **Joseph Washington, 6 Essex Lane** commented on not changing the charter language for residency requirements for the Town Manager. He noted that it does not send a good message to the community, by not having its CEO live amongst town residents.
4. **Dr. James Biffer, 17 Terry Plains Road** commented about several typos and grammatical errors that remain in the draft document. He commented on Section 203 – vacancies in elected offices should be filled by special election, can cause opportunity for politicization and abuse. If elected by the people, it should be filled by the people. In addition, he asked the Commission to remain steadfast and committed to preserving the people’s charter, and not be swayed by the Council on all that has been accomplished.

Dr. Biffer noted that months of work and public engagement have led to this draft. It would be inappropriate to make changes unilaterally proposed by the Council at this late date.

5. **John Davis, 2 Vista Way** inquired about why it is proposed that non-property owners get to vote on financial matters, given that revenue stream coming into Bloomfield is from property taxes. He also asked for clarification Section 904a. and obtaining copies of the budget at the Town Manager's Office available for takeout or to read them in the office.
6. **Jackie Green, 29 Woods Road** is not in support of compensation for the Town Council. She noted the importance of volunteerism and giving back to the community from the heart. She also encouraged the Commission to keep the residency requirement charter language for the Town Manager. If a resident, the Town Manager would have a more vested interest in mind for the community.
7. **Kate Keefe, 16 Breezy Knoll Drive** is not in support of compensation for the Town Council. She is also in opposition to the residency requirements for Town Manager and challenges faced recently, it is important to reside and live in Bloomfield. It is essential for the Town Manager to understand the fabric of the community, only truly achieve by living in it. This process lacks complete review, adding components from the community have not been considered.

Public Comments - Part II

In-Person

1. **Rickford Kirton, 7 Hickory Lane** Section 502 – make no sense to take this section out of the town charter. Review the town charter thoroughly, should have engaged the public more – not sufficient based on timeline.
2. **Lynette Grande, 18 Cliffmount Drive** How is the number of qualified electors going to be determined? It was noted that the Registrar of Voters list of electors at that time for that referendum. Town Clerk must certify petition, work directly with Registrar of Voters to ensure safeguards to prevent duplication.
3. **Attorney Kevin Deneen, 20 Maple Avenue, Windsor, CT (Representing the Blue Hills Fire District)** commented 7-191 – council must kick changes back to the commission, if nothing is changed, go to citizens vote, without considering tonight's comments.
4. **Jennifer Marshall-Nealy, Democratic Registrar of Voters** obtain monthly list of qualified electors – state voting system.
5. **Leslie Mara, 193 Duncaster Road** Town Manager potential life obligations should be considered-urge flexibility, residency not only thing that should be a deciding factor. Thanked them for their work.

6. **Suzette DeBeatham-Brown, 25 Fairfield Lane** thanked everyone in the room for coming out, continued to share information and stay engaged. She encouraged the Commission to follow the Town Attorney's recommendation and keep current residency language in the charter, don't have to enforce it.

Virtual

7. **Councilor Cindi Lloyd** expressed significant concerns over the timeliness of this process. She asked the Commission to provide the public with the next few upcoming meeting dates for more public engagement opportunities.
8. **Kate Keefe, 16 Breezy Knoll Drive** encouraged Commission members to allow more time to discuss and approve changes for a completed document.

Chairman Suggs noted that this is the last public hearing required to be held by the Commission. If there is a positive recommendation from the Charter Revision Commission to forward to the town council, there are tentative meetings scheduled to discuss and review the draft proposed charter revisions from the Commission.

The following dates are:

- *August 26, 2024 – Town Council Special Meeting (Set the Public Hearing)*
- *September 3, 2024 – Town Council Public Hearing*
- *September 4, 2024 – Town Council – Vote*

Public Comments – Part III

In-Person

1. **Suzette DeBeatham-Brown, 25 Fairfield Lane** asked about the timeline to review suggested comments and issues from tonight's meeting be clarified with additional recommendations and then back to the commission for approval.
2. **Gail Riley, 8 Maple Avenue** asked when will public have access to the latest and revised version of the town charter.
3. **Rickford Kirton, 7 Hickory Lane** expressed concern about the Commission voting to forward a document that is not complete to the Council.
4. **Sydney Schulman, 8 High Ledge Road** recommended to add language to the Election of Mayor section and include "the highest vote getter is Mayor", "second highest vote getter is Deputy Mayor."
5. **State Representative Bobby Gibson, 5 Greenbriar Drive** urged the Commission to slow down this process, the town deserves better.

