



City of Somerville, Massachusetts

City Council Charter Review Special Committee

Meeting Minutes

Wednesday, March 8, 2023

6:00 PM

This meeting was held via GoToWebinar and was called to order by Chair Scott at 6:01 pm and adjourned at 7:37 pm on a Roll Call Vote: 11 in favor (Councilors McLaughlin, Davis, Ewen-Campen, Pineda Neufeld, Clingan, Wilson, Burnley, Gomez Mouakad, Kelly, Strezo, Scott), 0 opposed, 0 absent.

Others present: Aneesh Sahni – Intergovernmental Affairs Director; Kimberly Wells – City Clerk; Bernabe Rodriguez – Assistant City Clerk; Brendan Salisbury – Legislative and Policy Analyst; Stephen McGoldrick - Edward J. Collins Center for Public Management; Beverly Schwartz – Charter Review Committee Member

Roll Call

Present: Chairperson Jefferson Thomas (J.T.) Scott, Vice Chair Kristen Strezo, Willie Burnley Jr., Matthew McLaughlin, Lance L. Davis, Ben Ewen-Campen, Judy Pineda Neufeld, Jesse Clingan, Jake Wilson, Beatriz Gomez Mouakad and Charlotte Kelly

1. Committee Minutes
(ID # [23-0266](#))

Approval of the Minutes of the Charter Review Special Committee Meeting of February 22, 2023.

RESULT: **ACCEPTED**

AYE: Chairperson Scott, Vice Chair Strezo, City Councilor At Large Burnley Jr., McLaughlin, Ewen-Campen, Pineda Neufeld, Clingan, Wilson and Gomez Mouakad

ABSENT: Davis and Kelly

2. Officer's Communication
(ID # [22-1520](#))

Charter Review Committee conveying its recommendations and proposed Charter text.

Chair Scott referred the Committee to the slides dated 02.22.23, related to the remaining Balance of Power and Budget topics. He noted that the next steps will include miscellaneous recommendations and the outcomes of working groups that have convened.

The discussion began with the recommendation of the Charter Review Committee to establish a Participatory Budgeting Study Committee. The Chair noted that Cambridge has utilized participatory budgeting for approximately eight years and Boston also established participatory budgeting in 2021. This committee is considered an intermediate step to Somerville adopting participatory budgeting as a requirement. The Chair

also reminded the Committee that a resolution to include a City Councilor and School Committee member on all study committees was previously approved. Beverly Schwartz noted that the support on the Charter Review Committee and the public, and the outstanding question was whether it belonged in the Charter or Code of Ordinances. Ms. Schwartz also noted that inclusion of this study committee might keep the momentum going, despite the current administration's implementation of participatory budgeting.

Councilor Ewen-Campen noted that this may not be necessary in the Charter, but he supports participatory budgeting. Chair Scott wondered if an Ordinance would need to be ordained to create the committee and then removed once the work was complete. He also inquired about whether this committee would be expected to outline guardrails to participatory budgeting generally. The City Council is called on to act on the committee's recommendations, but it is not clear what form those recommendations would take. Stephen McGoldrick clarified that this provision in the Charter would give the Council the authority to appoint members and bring this committee into existence and would not require an additional ordinance.

Chair Scott moved to support the recommended language by the Charter Review Committee to establish a Participatory Budgeting Study Committee. The motion was approved on a roll call vote of 9 in favor (Councilors Ewen-Campen, Pineda Neufeld, Clingan, Wilson, Burnley, Gomez Mouakad, Kelly, Strezo, Scott), 0 opposed, 2 absent (Councilors McLaughlin, Davis).

The next area of discussion was the recommendations of the Charter Review Committee to add a periodic review of compensation of all city employees to ensure compensation is distributed equitably and to the greatest extent possible compensation is sufficient to live in the city, and to establish an Equitable Compensation Committee. Chair Scott highlighted the differences between this body and the already established Municipal Compensation Advisory Board. Beverly Schwartz explained that this recommendation stemmed from a discussion of the Charter Review Committee, who supported the foundational value and concept of equitable pay, but the details and implementation were beyond the abilities of that Committee to determine. Councilor Strezo expressed support for these recommendations.

Chair Scott moved to support the recommended language by the Charter Review Committee to add a periodic review of compensation of all city employees to ensure compensation is distributed equitably and to the greatest extent possible compensation is sufficient to live in the city, and to establish an Equitable Compensation Committee. The motion was approved on a roll call vote of 11 in favor (Councilors McLaughlin, Davis, Ewen-Campen, Pineda Neufeld, Clingan, Wilson, Burnley, Gomez Mouakad, Kelly, Strezo, Scott), 0 opposed, 0 absent.

The Chair also noted language around strict enforcement of the prohibition on expenditures in excess of appropriations. Ms. Schwartz explained that

this is not in the current Charter because it is state law, and Mr. McGoldrick added that it is often included in Charter documents to highlight the provision.

Councilor Wilson shared that a small group met to discuss ideas regarding shifting budget allocation power to the City Council and noted that he believes it to be an issue addressed outside of the Charter at a later date. Councilor Ewen-Campen shared that there are no updates yet following discussion about department head appointments or legal counsel for the City Council and he hopes to have more information soon. Director Sahni shared that the administration is working on updated language regarding these items to address the concerns of the Council. Councilor McLaughlin asked for clarification on whether the administration was amenable to maintaining the outlined confirmation process, and Director Sahni noted that the administration is prepared to propose something based on the language shared by Councilor Ewen-Campen and they are comfortable with a confirmation process.

Councilor Ewen-Campen added that he would like to discuss language to address the Council's ability to confirm civil service appointments. Councilor Burnley requested more information regarding discussion of the Council's budgetary powers. Councilor Wilson added that his suggestion had been to enable the City Council to specifically reallocate any funds that it had cut. His impression was that there was a limited chance that such a provision would be approved by the legislature. Brendan Salisbury elaborated that the concerns were both operational and prospect for success. He noted that Boston's budget process was not accomplished through the state legislature and was in fact struck down by the legislature prior to being achieved through a ballot initiative. Councilor McLaughlin added that Boston also has a different set of rules in the state constitution, including special consideration as the largest city in the Commonwealth.

Chair Scott also expressed concern about the budget timeline, which does not leave sufficient time to discuss with constituents and make recommendations to effect meaningful change. He noted that the Charter in the city of Watertown provides for a synopsis from the executive by the end of January, at which time Councilors can also make recommendations, and a proposed operating budget presented to the City Council in April. A timeline closer to this would allow the City Council to engage in meaningful collaboration with residents and departments. Councilor Kelly added that this could build on provisions already included in the proposed Charter. Councilor Clingan wondered if the timeline was binding and if there was an impact of such an early proposal on understanding the available revenue. Chair Scott noted that the final budget could be adjusted once the revenue numbers are confirmed, but an earlier process enables greater visibility and discussion of priorities. Councilor Wilson expressed an interest in this idea and noted that estimates from the state are generally within \$250-\$500k of the actual amounts. Councilor Strezo voiced hesitation due to the differences between Watertown and Somerville and the bureaucracy it would require.

Ms. Schwartz shared that the reasons that the Charter Review Committee did not include an earlier process were due to the lack of final numbers from the state, the difficulty of the School Committee to present their budget in time based on their timeline for negotiating union contracts, and that processes tend to take up the time given and this could lead to the budget preventing other work from getting done for several months. Councilor Kelly clarified that additional time would be helpful, as the Finance Committee review schedule was difficult, and there is an appetite for additional transparency. Councilor Strezo emphasized support for the current language proposed by the Charter Review Committee, noting their work and research. Councilor Clingan noted an interest in more time and transparency but a hesitation to create additional work for staff. Councilor Burnley agreed that more transparency is needed, and more research and consideration of this topic would be helpful. Councilor Pineda Neufeld commented that the opinions of Director Bean and Director Mastrobuoni and other impacted staff would be valuable before making a decision. Councilor McLaughlin noted that the proposed language is good but he supports more research to improve it further if possible and Chair Scott agreed that more research and discussion is the appropriate next step.

RESULT: KEPT IN COMMITTEE