



City of Somerville, Massachusetts

City Council Charter Review Special Committee

Meeting Minutes

Wednesday, January 11, 2023

6:00 PM

COMMITTEE OF THE WHOLE

The Committee met as a Committee of the Whole.

The meeting was called to order by Chair Scott at 6:06PM and adjourned at 7:55PM.

Others present: Aneesh Sahni – Director of Intergovernmental Affairs, Nicholas Salerno – Election Commissioner, Jessica Lieberman – Charter Review Committee Member, Beverly Schwartz - Charter Review Committee Member, Kimberly Wells – City Clerk.

Roll Call

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

1. Committee Minutes
(ID # [22-2077](#)) Approval of the Minutes of the Regular Meeting on December 7, 2022.

RESULT: **APPROVED**

Public Hearing re: item# 22-1520

The Chair opened the public hearing at 6:10pm. There were six individuals present to speak in person and three providing public comments by virtual participation.

An overarching sentiment shared was the goal of unanimous approval and encouragement that the City Council not focus on items that conflict with state law, and avoid divisiveness with the state.

Patrick Cain, Ward 5, noted that he watched many meetings of the Charter Review Committee. He has been a poll worker for many years and shared confusion about the change in the number of signatures required to get on the ballot, despite the lack of individuals already running. He spoke a second time to note that HRPs were already passed related to voting.

Beverly Schwartz, Ward 1, member of Charter Review Committee, emphasized the goal of unanimous approval by the City Council and Mayor, Legislature and Governor, and city election. Beverly outlined some of the updates and emphasized the requirement for periodic review, and cautioned against divisiveness with the state.

Jessica Lieberman, Ward 6, member of the Charter Review Committee,

focused on the open and deliberative process of the Charter Review Committee and its emphasis on public outreach. She highlighted that giving the power to the City Council to add items to the budget would imperil all of the other important changes, and added that the Charter Review Committee unanimously supported the document they produced.

Zoe Iacovino, Ward 5, Charter Review Committee member, participated in public engagement and drafting and was inspired by the deep and diverse ties to the city that informed every decision. She spoke in favor of the changes to include enfranchisement of 16 and 17-year old and non-citizen residents. Zoe highlighted that the Charter Review Committee's first act was to set values for the process and they repeatedly returned to them.

Laura Pitone, Ward 1 School Committee Member and Charter Review Committee member, noted that the work was guided by community input and centered in the values of community conversations. The process was incredibly collaborative, with volunteers considering best practices, innovative ideas, and utilizing consultants and project managers to provide extensive research. The charter establishes how the city serves its residents regardless of who the individuals in any roles are. The community valued a single point of accountability in the Mayor, but the proposed document strengthened the balance of power. It also created the opportunity for more strategic planning and leadership with a four-year term for the Mayor. Complex problems such as the city faces needs dedicated and long-term energy. She emphasized that the input was solicited from many people over 18 months and urged respect of the proposal.

Joseph Lynch, Ward 5, shared that some issues could be decided on outside of charter change, noting that the final document submitted to the state legislature is a critical step. Submitting recommendations that are in conflict with state law spells doom for the city's request.

Meredith Porter, Ward 6, noted that he attended many of the events organized by the Charter Review Committee and appreciated the careful research. He also expressed understating how difficult it is to get approval from the state legislature, so while there may not be everything that everyone wants, this represents a realistic and important set of changes and urged unanimous adoption with as few changes as possible.

Jack Peremicz, Ward 5, noted that the modern language is paramount, and also spoke about electoral reforms, encouraging study outside of the Charter reform process. He emphasized support of the inclusion of the right of 16- and 17-year old residents to vote.

Jack Connolly encouraged extension of the written comment period and shared a concern about the 4-year Mayoral term, suggesting a non-binding referendum be put to the voters separately.

Chair Scott closed the public hearing at 6:35pm and encouraged Councilors to read the written comments that were submitted.

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

Charter Review Committee conveying its recommendations and proposed Charter text.

The Chair noted that the discussion is best focused on intent, and can later address the specifics of how to get there and what can be adjusted based on the likelihood of approval.

Chair Scott noted that the section of the Charter for discussion was Elections, with five sub-topics.

1. Expand Voting Rights to Non-Citizen Residents
2. Expand Voting Rights to 16- and 17-Year-Old Residents
3. Reducing Signature Requirements for Several Elected Offices
4. Establish a Ranked Choice Voting Study Committee
5. Establish a Public Financing of Municipal Campaigns Study Committee

The topic of expansion of voting rights to non-citizens was discussed first. Councilor Kelly expressed strong support but noted that this has already been put before the legislature with no movement. Director Sahni shared that Home Rule Petitions are often filed after the deadlines but he is not aware of any specific steps the legislature has taken. Councilor Burnley also emphasized support and asked about whether the Secretary of State's Office will accept the result if it is passed. Director Salerno has shared the information with the state but has not been informed about any specific steps. He added that he does not envision a problem with voter lists. Councilor Burnley stressed that these items are important and represent the city's values. Councilor Gomez Mouakad inquired about potential barriers to voter registration and Jessica Lieberman noted that there will need to be a strong focus on communication to affected residents and policies around implementation, but there were no specific barriers that the Committee identified. Councilor McLaughlin also conveyed strong support coupled with skepticism that it would pass at the state level, as many Home Rule Petitions have not.

Chair Scott moved to support the recommended language by the Charter Review Committee on expanding voting rights to non-citizen residents. The motion was approved.

On expanding voting rights to 16- and 17-year residents, Councilor Davis noted that the Home Rule Petition will be re-submitted to the City Council and again transmitted to the legislature.

Councilor Davis moved to support the recommended language by the

Charter Review Committee on expanding voting rights to 16- and 17-year old residents. The motion was approved.

The topic of reducing signature requirements was discussed next. The reductions would be by 50 for all offices except Mayor. The requirement to live in the Ward for a Ward seat is still present, but the seat is not vacated if they move during the term. Councilor Strezo disagreed with the change, sharing that working for the signatures demonstrates a devotion to the community. Jessica Lieberman shared the intent, which is that the act of running for office in itself demonstrates a commitment. The work will still be necessary in order to win election. This early part of the process felt arbitrary and that it would not improve the quality of the candidates.

Councilor Gomez Mouakad added that this will help the city elect people who are more representative of different perspectives in the community and they may not know the process well enough to focus on signatures.

Councilor Kelly asked about the rationale to increase the term limit for the Mayor without increasing the signature requirement. Jessica Lieberman noted that the requirement seemed appropriate for the office, regardless of term, the two were separate issues. Councilor Kelly added that many additional signatures are typically collected and supported the change.

Councilor Pineda Neufeld shared that she also supported the change, and any barriers to service. Councilor McLaughlin also supported the changes and added that the work will be done on the campaign trail. Councilor Burnley recognized the spirit of Councilor Strezo's concern but emphasized that a more equitable government is more important and he supported these reductions. Councilor Wilson agreed about lowering barriers to running for office and added that ranked choice voting is a great solution to the possibility that this may lead to more preliminary elections. Councilor Ewen-Campen noted that incumbency is a strength and challengers are good for democracy and should be encouraged. Chair Scott

Councilor Burnley moved to support the recommended language by the Charter Review Committee on reducing signature requirements for several elected officials. The motion was approved.

Chair Scott noted that the recommendation to establish a Ranked Choice Voting Study Committee would not be included in the Charter language, but would be a requirement if the Charter is adopted. Councilor Burnley asked how this would be implemented and Beverly Schwartz noted that it would require state approval but there is precedent in other Massachusetts municipalities. Stephen McGoldrick clarified that it would require a Special Act - a Home Rule Petition would be submitted to affect the change.

Councilor Kelly expressed concern about the composition of various study committees, noting that while staff are excellent, they are representatives of

the administration with no corresponding representatives of the City Council. Councilor McLaughlin agreed that this is a good idea, referencing the Charter Review Committee on which he served. Councilor Ewen-Campen and Councilor Clingan agreed.

Councilor Kelly moved to add language to the Charter that the City Council President or designee and School Committee Chair or designee be included in the composition of all study committees. The motion was approved.

The final topic discussed was establishment of a Public Financing of Municipal Campaigns Study Committee. Similar to the previous item, this would not be part of the Charter language but would be a requirement if the Charter is adopted. Councilors Burnley and Wilson expressed strong support. Councilor Gomez Mouakad emphasized that this also would be valuable to empower more diverse participation and representation. Councilor Ewen-Campen asked about whether municipal elections could be moved to coincide with federal elections. Commissioner Salerno shared that the state has previously said no to this request, but he is uncertain whether that is a law and will research further.

RESULT: KEPT IN COMMITTEE