



City of Somerville, Massachusetts

City Council Charter Review Special Committee

Meeting Minutes

Wednesday, January 25, 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 9:00 pm with a roll call vote of all in favor, none opposed, none absent.

Others present: Aneesh Sahni – Mayor’s Office, Brendan Salisbury – City Clerk, Beverly Schwartz – Charter Review Committee, Jessica Lieberman – Charter Review Committee, Stephen McGoldrick – Collins Center, Stephanie Widzowski – Clerk of Committees.

Roll Call

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

1. Committee Minutes (ID # [23-0105](#)) Approval of the Minutes of the Charter Review Special Committee, meeting as a Committee of the Whole on 1/11/23.

RESULT: **APPROVED**

AYE: Ward Two City Councilor Scott, City Councilor At Large Strezo, City Councilor At Large Burnley Jr., Clingan, Davis, Ewen-Campen, Gomez Mouakad, Kelly, McLaughlin, Pineda Neufeld and Wilson

2. Officer's Communication (ID # [22-1520](#)) Charter Review Committee conveying its recommendations and proposed Charter text.

Chair Scott referenced a series of slides (attached to item 22-1520) containing a summary of changes, proposed text and current text for each recommendation.

Recommendation #2: Maintain Mayor-Council System of Governance

Chair Scott said that community feedback overwhelmingly opposed switching to another form of government, and that ten councilors also expressed opposition to Council-manager system of governance in their campaigns for election. The Chair *moved to support the recommended language by the Charter Review Committee to maintain the Mayor-Council system of governance. Approved by a roll call vote of 11 in favor (Councilor Wilson, Councilor Pineda Neufeld, Councilor McLaughlin, Councilor Kelly,*

Councilor Clingan, Councilor Ewen-Campen, Councilor Gomez-Mouakad, Councilor Strezo Councilor Burnley, Councilor Davis, and Chair Scott), 0 opposed, 0 absent.

Recommendation #5: Retain Current City Council Structure

Chair Scott reviewed proposed changes to the current text, including that a councilor would be required to live in their respective ward when elected, but could relocate during their term. They also highlighted in the current text that no precinct is allowed to have more than 1000 registered male voters. Councilor McLaughlin spoke to the benefit of having ward-specific councilors and *support the recommended language by the Charter Review Committee to retain the current City Council structure. Approved by a roll call vote of 11 in favor (Councilor Wilson, Councilor Pineda Neufeld, Councilor McLaughlin, Councilor Kelly, Councilor Clingan, Councilor Ewen-Campen, Councilor Gomez-Mouakad, Councilor Strezo Councilor Burnley, Councilor Davis, and Chair Scott), 0 opposed, 0 absent.*

Recommendation #6: Retain 2-Year City Council Term

Chair Scott reviewed the Charter Review Committee's findings for this recommendation. The committee found that a 2-year term is standard for cities of Somerville's size, but stressed that the body must be representative of the city's demographics and be held accountable frequently. The committee considered staggered terms and recall provisions, but decided they were not necessary. Councilor Burnley *moved to support the recommended language by the Charter Review Committee to retain a 2-year City Council term. Approved by a roll call vote of 11 in favor (Councilor Wilson, Councilor Pineda Neufeld, Councilor McLaughlin, Councilor Kelly, Councilor Clingan, Councilor Ewen-Campen, Councilor Gomez-Mouakad, Councilor Strezo Councilor Burnley, Councilor Davis, and Chair Scott), 0 opposed, 0 absent* after being tabled for discussion after other items, such as the mayoral term, had been addressed.

Recommendation #13: Increase Mayoral Term to 4 Years

Many councilors expressed concerns with the proposed increase. Councilor Davis said that he feels a 4-year term would shift the balance of power toward the executive branch, and how the balance would be enforced. Councilor Gomez Mouakad talked about definitions of power and how long-term mayors establish control over information going through their departments. She asked if the Charter Review Committee had considered adding a term limit. Councilor Ewen-Campen spoke to the importance of checks and balances, and Councilor Wilson said that he would be more likely to support the change if a recall provision was added. Councilor Burnley stated that the arguments for increasing the term to four years do not match the reality of Somerville, and that he opposes this recommendation so strongly he would consider voting against the charter reforms entirely to prevent this from succeeding. Multiple councilors also expressed that large, substantive changes should not be in the charter and may work better in

another venue; for example, as a ballot question.

Dir. Sahni reiterated the benefits of the change from the Administration's perspective. Ms. Schwartz of the Charter Review Committee spoke to the benefits a 4-year term would make for a first time mayor, who otherwise may struggle in re-election. She also said that the extra time would help the mayor accrue staff. Councilor Strezo spoke in support of this. Ms. Lieberman of the Charter Review Committee said that in their research, they found that when term limits are implemented, would-be challengers wait until the incumbent is at their limit to run, reducing competition. Chair Scott noted that the recommendation is not just for first-time mayors, but generally. Councilor Kelly said that discussing only the administrative or bureaucratic elements of the item obscure the fact that these positions are inherently political and affect the lives of the many residents of the city.

Councilor McLaughlin *moved to support the recommended language by the Charter Review Committee to increase the mayoral term to 4 years. Not approved by roll call vote: 4 Yes (Councilor McLaughlin, Councilor Gomez Mouakad, Councilor Strezo, Councilor Pineda Neufeld), 7 No (Councilor Wilson, Councilor Kelly, Councilor Davis, Councilor Ewen-Campen, Councilor Clingan, Councilor Burnley, and Chair Scott) and 0 absent.*

Councilor Burnley moved to revise the language in the recommendation to a 2-year term. Ms. Schwartz suggested including revising the vacancy process in the motion, and Councilor Burnley amended his motion. The final motion is *to recommend revising the language proposed by the Charter Review Committee to a 2-year mayoral term, and to revise the proposed vacancy process. Approved by a roll call vote of 11 in favor (Councilor Wilson, Councilor Pineda Neufeld, Councilor McLaughlin, Councilor Kelly, Councilor Clingan, Councilor Ewen-Campen, Councilor Gomez-Mouakad, Councilor Strezo Councilor Burnley, Councilor Davis, and Chair Scott), 0 opposed, 0 absent.*

Recommendation #14: Add Chief Administrative Officer (CAO)

Chair Scott noted that the job requirements and hiring process would be written in the Administrative Code and would come before the Council separately.

Multiple councilors expressed their support for the addition of a CAO. Councilor Clingan said that in conjunction with keeping the mayoral term to two years, it could help inexperienced incoming mayors find their footing and potentially help a wider demographic find success in office. Councilor Pineda Neufeld spoke to her experience working with city government as a contractor during the pandemic and stressed the need for operational oversight on large projects.

Councilor Wilson also voiced support for a position to help operations, but

was concerned about checks and balances. He asked if it would be possible to implement staggered start and end dates for the position so that the CAO would bridge administrations. Mr. McGoldrick of the Collins Center said that statute allows anyone entering into this position to create an employment agreement. Regarding start and end dates, he suggested giving the CAO position a 3-year term to stagger with a 2-year mayoral term. Councilor Davis asked if there would be termination clauses in the contract, and whether the mayor would be able to terminate at-will or need to demonstrate cause. Mr. McGoldrick said that the mayor could terminate at-will.

Multiple councilors questioned whether the charter is the appropriate venue for the CAO position. Councilor Kelly noted that other proposed additions such as the advisory legal counsel or independent auditor are roles, not explicitly jobs, and that the mayor could decide to allocate funds to this position even if the Council cuts funding. Councilor Ewen-Campen voiced concerns that the CAO as drafted could ignore the advocacy of councilors. Councilor Burnley said he felt this was not consistent with the goals of the Charter Commission and would be better in an ordinance or another format. Ms. Schwartz said that the Charter Review Committee added this position to the charter because it is such a central role, and this would ensure that no particular mayor could appoint someone unqualified. Ms. Lieberman added that this is an attempt to increase transparency in mayoral operations and ensure that City Council could approve the position.

Councilor McLaughlin asked for this recommendation to be sent to a working group for discussion, and to see any changes alongside the original text. Councilor Ewen-Campen said that he would work with the Legislative & Policy Analyst, the Administration, and interested councilors to form a group to draft an alternate proposal.

RESULT: KEPT IN COMMITTEE