



City of Somerville, Massachusetts

City Council Charter Review Special Committee

Meeting Minutes

Tuesday, March 18, 2025

6:00 PM

Committee of the Whole

This meeting was called to order by Chair Scott at 6:01 pm and adjourned at 8:05 pm on a Roll Call Vote of 11 in favor (Councilors Mbah, Wilson Ewen-Campen, McLaughlin, Burnley, Sait, Strezo, Clingan, Davis, Pineda Neufeld, Scott), 0 opposed.

Chair Scott noted that Councilor Sait was unable to attend due to hosting a Ward 5 neighborhood meeting. Councilor Sait arrived at 6:40 pm.

Others present: Neha Singh – Intergovernmental Affairs Director; Brendan Salisbury – Legislative and Policy Analyst; Kimberly Wells – City Clerk

Roll Call

Present: Wilfred N. Mbah, Jake Wilson, Ben Ewen-Campen, Matthew McLaughlin, Willie Burnley Jr., Naima Sait, Kristen Strezo, Jesse Clingan, Lance L. Davis, Judy Pineda Neufeld and Jefferson Thomas (J.T.) Scott

1. Committee Minutes
(ID # [24-1599](#))

Approval of the Minutes of the Charter Review Special Committee of the Whole Meeting of October 29, 2024.

RESULT: **ACCEPTED**

AYE: Mbah, Ewen-Campen, McLaughlin, Burnley Jr., Strezo, Clingan, Davis, Pineda Neufeld and Scott

ABSENT: Wilson and Sait

2. Committee Minutes
(ID # [24-1632](#))

Approval of the Minutes of the Charter Review Special Committee of the Whole Meeting of November 13, 2024.

RESULT: **ACCEPTED**

AYE: Mbah, Ewen-Campen, McLaughlin, Burnley Jr., Strezo, Clingan, Davis, Pineda Neufeld and Scott

ABSENT: Wilson and Sait

3. Mayor's Communication
(ID # [24-1308](#))

Conveying recommendations on Charter reform.

RESULT: **RECOMMENDED TO BE MARKED WORK COMPLETED**

4. Home Rule
Petition
(ID # [25-0482](#))

By Councilor Ewen-Campen, Councilor McLaughlin and Councilor Davis
Proposing a Home Rule Petition to establish a charter for the City of
Somerville.

Chair Scott introduced a summary of the process, including a timeline of the steps taken since the introduction of an advisory charter review committee in 2020. He shared a compiled list of the substantive changes since the City Council last reviewed the document in October 2024. Councilor Davis shared that he participated in a working group to continue the process of a word-by-word review of the charter. He elaborated that there are many changes from the Mayor's version, which are denoted with highlighting in the document attached to the agenda titled "Charter Review - 2025-03-18 HRP Charter Revision - Highlighted (with 25-0482)". The working group members did take to heart the Mayor's version, and engaged with the Collins Center for Public Management and the administration. The group was not able to reach an agreement regarding the Mayor's proposed four-year term, and the version submitted and now before the Committee includes a two-year term for all elected officials. Councilor McLaughlin added that there was a lot of compromise, and this document reflects the values of the city and allows it to move forward. There is room to discuss the Mayoral term in the future, and this document will also be revisited in the future. Councilor McLaughlin urged approval from the Committee. Councilor Ewen-Campen added that it is time to pass this. He compared the process to the overhaul of the Zoning Ordinance, where the approach was to separate out issues for the future, in order to pass an important document for the present. He added that the change of Mayoral term could be a separate issue placed before the voters, but this is a good, modernized charter.

Chair Scott referred the Committee to the document titled "HRP Charter Revision" as they outlined the list of substantive changes, detailed in "Charter Review - 2025-03-18 Review Process and Recommendations (with 25-0482)". Chair Scott asked about the change from "and" to "or" in the section regarding posting meetings, and Councilor Davis clarified that the use of "and" would significantly increase the posting requirements for all postings, including for example, that committee meeting agendas be posted in a local newspaper. The change maintains the status quo. Chair Scott also highlighted the inclusion of a reconfirmation requirement for quasi-judicial and regulatory multi-member bodies. The Chair asked for clarification on what happens when reconfirmation fails, and Councilor Davis noted that this would be a vacancy, and referred back to the section regarding filling vacancies. Analyst Salisbury added that there is language setting out a 150-day timeline for temporary appointments.

Chair Scott highlighted the provision that the Mayor may serve on any multi-member body in an ex-officio capacity, but does not have a vote. Councilor Davis added that this is part of a multiple-pronged approach to address the issue of vacancies. This aligns with the next change, that the Mayor must communicate temporary appointments to the City Council. Chair Scott also noted that the City Solicitor is now called the City Attorney, and is appointed to two-year terms, with reconfirmation required every two years. The City Attorney appointment process will also include a screening committee that includes a City Councilor. Changes were also made to the filling of vacancies in the office of the Mayor, requiring a special election only if the vacancy occurs six months or more prior to the end of the term. The Chair pointed out that the language states that the seat

would be filled by the City Council President, and the seat of the City Council President would then be filled according to the provisions outlined in the section regarding vacancies for their seat (either At-Large or Ward). Analyst Salisbury recommended removing the last line in Section 3-13(b) and Councilor Davis noted that this was included in the Mayor's version and was an oversight, and agreed.

Councilor Davis moved to strike the last sentence of Section 3-13(b). The motion was approved on a roll call vote of 11 in favor (Councilors Mbah, Wilson, Ewen-Campen, McLaughlin, Burnley, Sait, Strezo, Clingan, Davis, Pineda Neufeld, Scott), 0 opposed. Chair Scott also highlighted changes to filling vacancies on the School Committee.

Section 6-7 regarding the independent auditor was the subject of much previous discussion among the Council, and the proposed language places the appointment of the auditor with the Mayor, with the Council having purview over the selection of a department, division, or program focus each year. Chair Scott shared as well that the provisions to allow non-citizen and 16- and 17-year-old voting in municipal elections have been removed. Councilor McLaughlin emphasized that these items are unlikely to pass the state legislature. The city has submitted Home Rule Petitions on these items, as recently as last week. The city would like the state to consider those items separately, without jeopardizing the passage of this charter. Councilor Burnley asked if the language for candidacy for Mayor and other offices could be changed to municipal voter rather than statewide voter, to prepare for a future where non-citizen voting may be allowed. Councilor Clingan expressed concern that the state legislature might not approve a charter with these provisions. Councilor Wilson suggested adding "adult". Councilor Burnley moved to amend Sections 2-1(c), 3-1(c), 4-1(c), and 4-6 to replace "statewide voter" with "municipal voter". The motion was not approved on a roll call vote of 3 in favor (Mbah, Burnley, Scott), 8 opposed (Wilson, Ewen-Campen, McLaughlin, Sait, Strezo, Clingan, Davis, Pineda Neufeld).

Chair Scott indicated that the next change is the exclusion of multi-member bodies required by Massachusetts General Laws from the required periodic review. The multi-member body review committee had its members articulated. Acceptance of the state law regarding constables must be considered within four months of the adoption of the charter. Finally, adoption of the charter will be placed on the ballot for the November 2025 municipal election. Councilor Davis asked if there was any possibility of contingency language to place this on a subsequent election ballot, in the event that it is not approved by the state in time for November 2025. Chair Scott noted that the top section enables the legislature and Mayor to make amendments, and this would qualify as a clerical adjustment.

Councilor Wilson suggested that bodies constituted by Massachusetts General Law should remain included in the review of multi-member bodies provided for in Section 8-6, as their function can still be considered, just not whether they exist. Analyst Salisbury highlighted the distinction between bodies required by general law versus those created by adopting general law, and added that bodies could at any time be reviewed separately. This is language that the state legislature expects to see. Councilor McLaughlin asked Intergovernmental Affairs Director Singh if there was anything aside from the four-year term that would cause the Mayor to reject this charter. Director Singh expressed disappointment regarding the omission of the four-year Mayoral term, as recommended by the Charter Review Committee, the Collins Center for Public Management, extensive community

engagement, and community survey. Councilor McLaughlin emphasized that those folks also want to see this move forward. Councilor Mbah asked for more information about the audit provision and suggested that the language should be eliminated. Councilor Wilson expressed support for the four-year term, but greater support for getting a charter passed, and putting a separate question regarding the Mayoral term on the 2027 ballot.

Chair Scott asked that a scrivener's correction be made to line 320 to correct "until for". He also highlighted Section 9-1(b), noting that while the Police Chief has been removed from Civil Service, this would also remove the Fire Chief. Director Singh clarified that it was not the intent to remove the Fire Chief from Civil Service. Chair Scott moved to amend the language in the second sentence of Section 9-1(b) to read **"Uniform positions within the police department below the rank of chief of department, and the uniformed positions in the fire department, below the rank of chief of department shall continue to be subject to said chapter 31."**

Chair Scott again recapped the process of sending the Special Act from the City Council to the Mayor, to the state legislature, the Governor, and the municipal voters. The Chair expressed disappointment in the lack of changes to the document, and the continued lack of balance of power, but noted that this is an improvement.

RESULT: **RECOMMENDED TO BE APPROVED AS AMENDED**

AYE: Mbah, Wilson, Ewen-Campen, McLaughlin, Burnley Jr., Sait, Strezo, Clingan, Davis, Pineda Neufeld and Scott

Referenced Documents:

- Charter Review - 2025-03-18 HRP Charter Revision - Highlighted (with 25-0482)
- Charter Review - 2025-03-18 Review Process and Recommendations (with 25-0482)