

Williamstown Charter Review Committee Minutes of meeting on December 1, 2022

Present: Andy Hogeland, Chair, Nate Budington, Mary Kennedy, Anne Skinner, Jeff Strait. Bob Menicocci, Town Manager, *ex officio*

Also present: Charles Bonenti, Library Trustee

The meeting was called to order at 1:30.

Three members of the Collins Center, Marilyn Contreas, Patricia Lloyd and Michael Ward, made a presentation on the current charter. Since 2008 the Collins Center has been a resource for local municipal bodies and state agencies. The presentation is available on the Charter Committee website.

The current charter is quite good for its age, and effective. It is somewhat outdated and could use inclusion of new technology. Significant changes include replacing the description of the town-wide school committee with the existing regional agreement, including the mechanism for election. References to the relationship between the town and the Fire District were also recommended.

The speakers listed a number of emerging trends in charters. They noted that many communities are moving to eliminate residency requirements for town managers. Other trends include adopting recall provisions, decreasing the number of elected officials, periodic charter review; increasing centralization of management, and creating SOP's for board and committees that include procedures on removals and suspension. Trends that may increase in the future include defining how the charter is to be enforced, coordination of EMS response and the development of community engagement.

Because the town population is >6000 (7500), Williamstown could adopt a representative town meeting. It is not large enough to adopt the "council" form of town meeting which is more designed for cities. The pros and cons of open town meeting were noted, along with some suggested remedies for problems such as overlong meetings. If the town were to adopt representative town meeting, the number of representatives would be up to the town to decide. Committee members noted that a representative town meeting does not preclude 'packing' a meeting since representatives could run on a platform, and also that some communities, after the initial enthusiasm, have found it hard to get people to run. And some representatives don't take the responsibility seriously.

Overall, a charter should be clear and consistent, guarantee coordination within town government and guarantee accountability. The speakers noted that we may not be able to address all the issues in the current effort.

Following the presentation, committee members asked questions. What should be in SOP's? Generally, they cover the need to comply with the Open Meeting law, the definition of a quorum, and the need to keep minutes. These would not have to be in the charter itself; they could be an appendix. This led to a question on charter versus bylaw. The advice from Collins is to have only the fundamental issues in the charter. If it is too specific, it is easily outdated. Another appendix, for example, could list all boards and committees.

How can we enforce the charter? By state law (CH. 43), anyone can go to superior court with a complaint that the charter is being violated. An alternative is a charter enforcement committee such as the one for Provincetown, that holds hearings. If this does not resolve this issue, the complainant can still go to court. The important thing is to get complaints out in public.

How can the charter increase public participation? Some suggestions were community surveys, or holding meetings outside of town hall. An advisory committee could recruit and vet people for boards and committees, trying to get new voices. Such a committee should probably not be in the charter itself.

Town meeting participation might be increased by holding the meeting on Saturday. Holding more than one town meeting a year, one for budget, say, and one for planning, would alleviate long meetings. Remote participation has to be authorized by the state.

If the town continues to have town elections before town meeting, the charter should codify that the newly elected take office at the end of town meeting. This had been the practice but, when COVID forced long gaps between elections and meetings, people began to be sworn in earlier.

The committee thanked Collins for their help and went on to other business.

Minutes were approved 3-0-2 (Budington and Skinner abstaining).

The question-writing group (Bergeron, Kennedy and Strait) was asked to finalize questions. Bob Menicocci noted at the next department head meeting he intended to get input on how to reach staff, perhaps by a survey, perhaps by focus groups.

The chair suggested the following timetable for work: data collection in January and February; analysis in March; with a goal of having something to present either as a flyer or a forum before Town Meeting in May.

Meeting adjourned at 2:35

Respectfully submitted,

Anne Skinner

