

Charter Review Commission
Williamstown MA

Meeting Minutes from 4/6/23

Present: Jeff Johnson, Mary Kennedy, Jeff Strait, Andy Hogeland, Anne Skinner, Nate Budington, Bob Mennicocci

Absent: Joe Bergeron

Meeting called to order at 1:30pm by Co-Chair Hogeland

Previous meeting minutes approved (Strait/Skinner) unanimously

The Commission heard a presentation from Voter Choice MA regarding Ranked Choice Voting. VCMA was represented by Jeanne Kempthorne, Ian Warren, Chris Kapiloff, Greg Dennis

Jean Kempthorne from VCMA presented a detailed description of how ranked choice voting works for single and multiple candidacy elections. She also shared how VCMA sees the advantages of ranked choice voting: avoiding spoiler candidates; winners must attain a majority vote; increasing voter choices; strengthening voter voices; increasing turnout; reduction in negative campaigning. She noted that in 2021 a Planning Board seat was won by a candidate with 37% of the vote and that in 13 Williamstown elections over the last ten years, RCV would have potentially altered the outcome.

Additionally, she noted that RCV changes the culture of campaigning as it encourages candidates to run, allows voters to express true preferences, increases turnout and inspires vibrant, competitive elections. As candidates must reach out to a broad swath of the population, negative campaigning is disincentivized.

Ms. Kempthorne suggested the Commission endorse the upcoming RCV warrant article, consider replacing the 2-2-1 election cycle with a combined election for all town elected officials, and support the Local Option Bill (S.433/H711). Mr. Strait expressed concern that the current warrant article was wordy and confusing and asked if the language could be simplified, and that the issue would require some extensive public education. Ms. Skinner expressed support noting that election winners with low vote percentages need to change. Mr Strait expressed support but needs time to go over the warrant in depth. Mr. Johnson expressed support but noted public understanding is critical. Mr. Budington expressed support but would like to explore the full range of arguments against. Mr. Hogeland felt any endorsement was premature and was unsure

if RCV applies well for local elections. Hogeland suggested community learning sessions to explain RCV before any action.

Mr. Budington reported on the issue of instituting a recall process and noted that a number of towns have such a process that can be used for removing an impaired/incapacitated member or simply removing an unpopular official. Mass. courts have affirmed the right for citizens to use a recall process to remove an official with whom they simply have disagreements. It was noted that there are vast differences in the threshold for instituting a recall election town to town: some required as few as 50 signatures, some required a significant percentage of registered voters. Mr. Budington noted that the threshold question would be a critical question to address were Williamstown to consider such a policy, as a low threshold could invite chaos and the possible expense of special elections.

Mr. Budington also reported on the issue of term limits. He noted that as of 2016, only three Massachusetts towns had term limits for elected officials. From a Collins Center report, he noted that the arguments against term limits were: the loss of institutional memory; further complicating the increasing difficulty in recruiting citizens to serve; and loss of expertise. The arguments for included the avoidance of committee sclerosis, eliminating roadblocks for recruiting younger/new participants in town government. Mr. Strait emphasized the expertise question by noting that in his service on the Finance Committee, it took him two years to feel like he had mastered the committee's work. Ms. Skinner noted that losing institutional memory would handicap a committee's effectiveness.

Mr. Strait reported on the issue of periodic charter reviews. He noted that the current charter review committee reflects the first review since the charter's adoption in 1956. As examples, he presented Wareham, with a policy of charter review every 10 years, and Andover which opted for an "as needed" policy. Mr. Strait noted that he supports an every-10-year option as he's not confident town boards will know when a review might be needed and that it's healthy to "look under the hood" every ten years. He suggested we look over some Mass. charters adopted under Home Rule Petitions for helpful language we might borrow. Ms. Skinner asked if we are stuck forever with having to go to the legislature for charter changes or could we convert to Home Rule. Mr. Strait noted that HR petitions have some significant limitations that might restrict our ability to adopt ranked choice voting, were that to be the voters' preference. Mr. Hogeland noted that an HR charter comes with a loss of autonomy.

Mr. Hogeland mentioned that there are a few more topics for commission members to report on and asked for members to each consider taking on a few more assignments.

The meeting was adjourned (Skinner/Straight).

Respectfully submitted,

Nate Budington
4/18/2023