

Williamstown Charter Review Committee

Minutes of the May 4, 2023 Meeting
Town Hall, 31 North Street, Williamstown, Massachusetts

Present: Joe Bergeron, Nate Buddington, Andy Hogeland, Jeff Johnson (via Zoom), Mary Kennedy, Anne Skinner, Jeff Strait, and Town Manager Bob Mennicocci (*ex officio*)

Co-Chair Hogeland called the meeting to order at 1:30 pm.

Minutes from the April 6, 2023 meeting were approved unanimously. (Skinner moved, Kennedy seconded.)

Ranked-Choice Voting:

Ian Warren representing Voter Choice MA appeared before the committee with an update on last month's discussion. A citizens petition article "Ranked Choice Voting for Williamstown Elections" will appear on the warrant for the May 16, 2023 Town Meeting. Warren's group plans to withdraw that article at Town Meeting due to apprehension about its timing and complexity. They plan to continue to educate the community about ranked-choice voting and urge the Charter Review Committee to recommend ranked-choice voting in its report. Perhaps in 2024 Town Meeting can consider ranked-choice voting.

Skinner expressed her general support for ranked-choice voting and noted that a large majority of the respondents to our community survey favored it. Still she felt that it could wait a year.

Strait thanked Warren for giving the committee more time to consider ranked-choice voting. He asked how the details of ranked-choice voting described in the Town Meeting article compare to the ranked-choice voting ballot question in the 2020 Massachusetts general election. He also asked if the algorithm for determining the winner is the same as that used in voting machine software and in other municipalities. Would it be prudent for Williamstown to wait until the state has adopted ranked-choice voting to be certain that the town's voting procedures are compatible?

Warren responded that the 2020 state ballot question dealt with single-seat elections for state officials and the rules for determining the winner are the same as those in the article before Town Meeting. However town elections often include more than one seat on a board or a committee, so the article was extended to include multiple-seat elections. Williamstown uses Dominion Voting Systems machines. Dominion offers software that implements multiple-seat ranked-choice voting as described in the Town Meeting article.

Skinner expressed concern about needing to buy or lease additional software for town elections. Would this software be compatible with the state?

Johnson said that he had learned from voterchoicema.org that Cambridge, Easthampton, and Amherst currently use ranked-choice voting for municipal elections. We can look to those communities for models of how they deal with these issues.

Town Clerk Nicole Beverly joined the meeting and stated that she was uncertain how to hand count ballots under ranked-choice voting. At each election she has to hand count 50 ballots to test the voting machines. Furthermore recounts are done by hand. She urged the town to wait for the state to adopt ranked-choice voting.

Technology in Municipalities:

Bergeron presented an overview of the document included in the online meeting packet. Many items dealt with using the town's website to present information to the community or to allow online transactions such as payments and applications. Bergeron also discussed issues related to the software that the town uses.

Hogeland suggested that the town "push" more information to the community, perhaps through periodic emails. Strait expressed the opinion that the town's current website is difficult to navigate. Town Manager Mennicocci stated that redesigning the website is a priority of his administration.

Committee Outreach:

Hogeland mentioned that the committee could publicize its work at the May 16 Town Meeting and at the August 1 National Night Out. Committee members agreed.

Rational for a Strong Town Manager:

Hogeland wrote a document on this subject included in the online meeting packet. After describing the roles of a strong Town Manager and of the Select Board, he highlighted two areas of concern.

- (1) The division of appointment authorities between the Town Manager and the Select Board. The Manager should appoint when specialized expertise is paramount and the Select Board should appoint when policy is important. Are the current appointment authorities appropriate?
- (2) The Select Board role in the budget. Since the Select Board guides the town's policies, should the Town Manager submit his budget to the Select Board before it goes to the Finance Committee? Bergeron warned that some other towns have experienced difficulties if the Select Board and the Finance Committee do not agree. Who has the authority to determine which version of a budget goes to Town Meeting? Johnson stated that he found this year's joint meeting of the Select Board and the Finance Committee to discuss the budget very helpful.

The meeting adjourned at 2:55 pm.

Submitted by Jeff Strait