Williamstown Charter Review Commission

Minutes of the Oct 12, 2023 meeting

In attendance: Andy Hogeland, Jeff Johnson, Anne Skinner, Jeff Strait, Mary Kennedy, Nate Budington

Ex Officio: Bob Menicocci

Meeting was called into order at 1:30 by Mr Hogeland

Mr Hogeland reported to the committee that various commissioners had attended outside events in order to receive feedback on the charter review process. Events attended occurred at National Night Out, the Harper Center, and the farmer’s market.

Mr Strait referenced a letter sent to the Commission by Fred Puddester. Mr Strait agreed with many of Mr Puddester’s comments, especially those concerning the skewed data from the survey and whether or not the charts reflecting responses had a place in the Commission’s report. He was also in agreement with Mr Puddester's view that many statements in the draft report were stated as fact when they were opinion. In addition, Mr Strait echoed Mr Puddester’s questioning the necessity of a separate taxing authority for the fire department and urged the Commission to take a strong stand relative to eliminating this authority. Mr Hogeland recommended, instead, a town-wide discussion on this issue rather than the Commission taking a position.

Ib a short discussion concerning town meeting, Mr Strait offered that exploring the idea of representative town meeting was worth exploring, Mr Hogeland floated the idea of a non-binding referendum on representative vs. open town meeting, Mr Budington suggested opening the debate to a town-meeting-as-debate-forum-only option. Ms Skinner would like to explore the impact of electronic voting on town meeting and whether or not it encourages or discourages participation. Ms Skinner further noted that a changed town meeting format, were it to occur, would not lead to any better citizen representation than the current format. Mr Budington noted that town meeting, in any format, is an impediment to voter participation from a number of groups including the disabled, single parents, second-shift workers etc. Mr Hogeland countered that representative town meeting allows for remote participation.

Mr Johnson reported on his visit to the Harper Center where he encountered little interest in the Charter but significant interest in town meeting. There were concerns about the decision to move town meeting to the HS and away from the town center.

The Committee went down the list of topics Mr Hogeland had assembled as possible topics to forward to the Collins Center for possible review/advising. On the issue of whether the Planning Board should be elected or appointed, Mr Hogeland noted that given the technical nature of the work, membership by appointment makes it more likely the committee has the right expertise, though Mr Strait noted that unlike many town offices, Planning Board elections tend to be competitive. Mr Strait also expressed concern about the lack of definition of the role played by the Finance Committee in the budget process, noting in particular the recent decision to offer severance packages to town employees without the Finance Committee’s knowledge or participation.

Mr Hogeland mentioned that given an uptick in the pace of the Commission’s work, the committee should be prepared to meet two times per month in the future.

The next meeting will be Nov 2 at 1:30, town hall.

Meeting was adjourned.

Respectfully submitted

Nate Budington

Oct 30, 2023