

MINUTES - Amesbury Charter Review Commission (ACRC)

Tuesday, September 15, 2020, 7:00pm, Virtual Meeting (via GTM and ACTV)

COMMISSIONERS IN ATTENDANCE

Peter Frey
Anne Ferguson
Nick Wheeler
Kate Currie
Rob Chamberlain

Absent

Jonathan Sherwood
Christian Scorzoni

OTHERS IN ATTENDANCE

Paul Fahey, Chief of Staff, Office of the Mayor (Staff Liaison)

CALL TO ORDER/ROLL CALL Nick Wheeler called the meeting to order at 7:10 PM.

REVIEW AND APPROVAL OF MINUTES FROM AUGUST 27, 2020 Rob Chamberlain moved to approve the minutes, seconded by Anne Ferguson. 5 in favor, 2 absent.

CHAIR'S REPORT Nick Wheeler informed the commission the report is not available for this meeting and will be prepared for the next meeting.

CONTINUED DISCUSSION OF COLLINS CENTER REPORT Rob Chamberlain had questions about sections 5.1 and 5.2 regarding budget policy. Rob asked if the joint meeting with the city council prior to the budget process is typically performed in formal practice to have a review of the city financial situation.

Nick Wheeler responded that this is not formally held but the state of the city address might meet this requirement.

Paul Fahey informed that the mayor held a presentation at a council meeting to meet this requirement.

Nick Wheeler reviewed provisions in section 5.2 and confirmed that the presentation of the budget by the mayor meets this requirement.

Rob Chamberlain stated his question had more to do with the second paragraph regarding the operating budget adopted by the school committee and its timing related to the overall city budget. An original budget was submitted and then a revised budget was later submitted outside of the definitive timeline set forth by the charter. This created some confusion.

Nick Wheeler referred to the specific situation where this had happened, and it was likely a unique circumstance. Nick asked if it could be verified with KP Law with what their insight had been on this topic. If there is not going to be a proposed change to the charter, then it may not make sense to seek further input.

DISCUSSION OF PUBLIC FEEDBACK QUESTIONS

Nick Wheeler referred to the list of questions and commentary prepared by Peter Frey and sent by Paul Fahey. It was suggested that the list be reviewed, and the context be discussed for any potential changes.

There were no recommended changes to the context for the first feedback question.

Nick Wheeler suggested specifying the word Amesbury in front of positions and boards in the second question and throughout the feedback questions.

Kate Currie suggested specifying “comparably sized cities” to explain the basis of comparison to other cities in the context for question two.

There was a discussion regarding question four with the library board of trustees context referring to the feedback that elected boards was traditionally from past eras. It was decided that this information was not relevant and did not need to be included. Instead, the contextual information mentioned this provision was from Amesbury’s previous organization as a town.

The commission decided to add contextual information for topics three and four about Amesbury’s policies compared to similar cities.

Nick Wheeler recommended changing language in context for topic 5 so the word allowed is not being used multiple times in a sentence. The context should also specify “general municipal elections” because these cannot be included during general state elections.

Christian Scorzoni joined the meeting at 7:38 PM.

The commission discussed confusing language in the context for question six regarding the chair of the school committee. The format of the context was adjusted to make this more clear.

The context for the free petition topic was discussed. A correction was made to specify when the free petition must be acted on.

Peter Frey asked whether specific numbers should be included for potential changes to requirements for citizen participation questions.

Nick Wheeler suggested public sentiment be gauged to determine if a change should be considered before researching what it should be changed to.

Christian Scorzoni asked if this topic is a concern that has been brought up by anyone. The threshold should not be made too low so that the work done by elected officials is not undermined.

Christian Scorzoni recommended consistent wording for public feedback questions 8 and 9 to get general feedback rather than specific numerical changes.

Nick Wheeler commented that contextual information from comparative communities might provide justification for including these numbers.

The commission decided to adjust the context and questions, so the wording is consistent and feedback is more general.

Nick Wheeler suggested the question for recall efforts also be amended to reflect non-specific lowering of the requirement to be consistent with the previous questions.

Jonathan Sherwood joined the meeting at 7:57 PM.

Motion by Anne Ferguson, seconded by Christian Scorzoni to approve the questions for public feedback as amended during the meeting. 6 in favor, 1 abstention.

DISCUSSION OF PUBLIC MEETING DATE

Nick Wheeler asked Paul Fahey what the current situation is with resuming in-person public meetings.

Paul Fahey responded that some boards and committees have resumed in-person meetings. Resources are available to help if the commission decided to hold an in-person meeting with the public.

Nick Wheeler asked if the capability existed to have some members in person and some remotely.

Paul Fahey responded that having a quorum in person with other members remote has been allowed. If there are no action items on the agenda, it may not matter to have a quorum present.

Anne Ferguson commented that a major aspect of this would be expected attendance from the public and it may not be very high participation for this topic.

Peter Frey asked if the commission felt there was an advantage to having the format in person rather than in a remote setting

Christian Scorzoni asked if it would be possible to put out a webinar product informing the public about the charter review and its process. There may be better ways to make this more productive than having a regular meeting at city hall.

Nick Wheeler mentioned a past survey distributed for the open space committee that had a significant survey response.

Paul Fahey mentioned Caitlin Thayer could be available to help in publicizing the survey to increase feedback participation.

Jonathan Sherwood discussed platform for survey questions. Survey Monkey is an option that has been used but Google Forms is another option.

Paul Fahey recommended a proposal be established for format and mechanism of surveys by a smaller group prior to the next meeting. At the next meeting, the logistics for this will be decided on.

There can be some flexibility on the timeline if an extra meeting or two is needed beyond what is currently planned.

OTHER BUSINESS

Nick Wheeler requested minutes from prior meetings be added to the city's website.

PUBLIC COMMENT

Steve Stanganelli, 12 Amidon Avenue: While it is important to go through the details of specific language, I'm wondering if any consideration has been made to discuss the merits of one form of government over another (example: strong mayor-weak council, council-city manager)?

Nick Wheeler responded that the city council does not have a broad mandate regarding the city form of government but is specifically tasked with a periodic review for specific provisions needing to be amended.

Steve Stanganelli, 12 Amidon Ave.: Regarding the poll question about city councilors, I personally am not in favor of a longer term universally. I might recommend a staggering of terms so that not all 9 councilors are elected at the same time.

The staggering of terms will be explored if necessary to accompany a decision to lengthen the terms of city councilors.

Steve Stanganelli, 12 Amesbury MA: Is there any potential discussion of increasing the minimum voter participation level for certain bond actions? As an example, in CA the minimum threshold is 55% (a slight

super-majority) for bonds on infrastructure. <https://lao.ca.gov/reports/2014/finance/local-taxes/voter-approval-032014.aspx>

Nick Wheeler responded the requirement for bonds is specified by proposition 2.5 at the state level. There is no language for this at the charter level.

The commission discussed the form of presentation for the final report from the commission. A cover letter outlining the decisions made by the commission would accompany a red-lined and final report to the council. The documents submitted to the council can detail minority opinions on specific topics if they exist.

Steve Stanganelli, 12 Amidon Ave: I know I've brought this up before but I do believe that the Charter should address having an elected FinCom that might include some Councilors. I realize that the response was that the Council rules might address this but I don't think that gives the people the choice.

Nick Wheeler responded that it was previously discussed that the council rules address this and the charter does not currently provide for this. A section would need to be added to change this structure.

Paul Fahey clarified that Steve is asking for an elected board which might not currently exist in other comparable cities. In some town meeting style forms of government, a finance committee would be established to make recommendations to the town meeting.

Nick Wheeler pointed out that individuals could not hold multiple elected positions which would prevent city council members from serving on the finance committee. The council rules would be the best place to make an organizational change to the finance committee.

NEXT MEETING DATE Thursday, September 24, 2020 7:00 PM via GoToMeeting

ADJOURNMENT Peter Frey moved to adjourn, seconded by Anne Ferguson. Unanimously approved. Meeting adjourned at 8:48.

Respectfully prepared and submitted by Peter Frey, Secretary, Amesbury Charter Review Commission