

**TOWN OF HAMDEN, CONNECTICUT
CHARTER REVISION COMMISSION
MINUTES OF MEETING**

February 23, 2021

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A meeting of the Charter Revision Commission was held on Tuesday, February 23, 2021 via Zoom due to the Covid-19 Pandemic. The meeting was called to order at 7:00 P.M. by the Chair, Mr. Dixon and roll call was taken.

MEMBERS PRESENT: Frank Dixon, Chair; Jackie Downing, Vice-Chair; Lamond Battle, Secretary; Jay Kaye; Tom Figlar; Sarah Gallagher; Jeff Cohen; Todd Berton; Todd Moler; Nancy Olson; Frank LaDore (@ 7:20 PM)

MEMBERS ABSENT: Tiffany Artis-Wilson; Myron Hul; Marnie Hebron; Joshua Sprague-Oliveira

ALSO IN ATTENDANCE: Steve Mednick, Counsel

APPROVAL OF PREVIOUS MINUTES – Not ready

Before introducing tonight’s panel Mr. Mednick started by saying there are 2 required provisions for a Charter. One is to have a Legislative Body and the other is to have a Chief Executive Officer. He then introduced the following panel members.

Town Governance Issues:

Panel Members:

Joe DeLong, Executive Director and CEO, Connecticut Conference of Municipalities:

Mr. DeLong started by saying he deals with every form of government and they all can work and they all can fail. He said there is no right answer, just the right question, and that is “why are you looking to change?” What is it that works for your community and what is it you’re trying to accomplish? He

then said there are pros and cons to both a Mayor form and a Town Manager form. **The pros for a Mayor form of government are:** You have a face that is accountable to the community. You have a person who has to run campaigns which creates a situation where the community knows who their leader is. That leader is accountable to the community and that's a benefit when you're trying to keep people involved in their government. **The cons:** They're not necessarily trained in all the administrative aspects or always full time planted in an office focused on doing the administrative functions of the job.

Mr. DeLong said now when you get on the other side of these issues with Town Managers. **The Pros for a Town Manager form of government:** You have someone who is a professional, someone who has went to school and trained for it, they understand the inner workings of government and can become very good at the daily administrative tasks of running a community. **The cons:** They're not as forward facing and not as engaged with the community and many times instead of being accountable to the electret they're actually kind of protected or shielded from the electret so people in the community don't know how to hold them accountable for their decisions or who they necessarily report to, but there are exceptions to this in smaller communities.

Mr. DeLong said he knows that Hamden has some fiscal challenges it needs to work its way through. He said one thing he thinks you need to understand when setting up any form of government is it doesn't take years of bad decisions that puts a community in fiscal peril, it's usually a decision and that decision then gets inherited year after year, Mayor after Mayor, Governor after Governor, etc. He said it can be handed to someone and it's massive and it's difficult. He said one thing he wants to express is that no Mayor and no Town Manager will ever be able to address those challenges without 100% backing and support from the electret in their community to do the hard things that have to be done.

Hon. Christine Goupil – Clinton Migrates from first Selectman to Town Manager

Ms. Goupil said before she became First Selectman they had a Board of Selectman form of government and they had a Board of Finance. The Board of Finance became political and the community didn't feel it was in their best interest going forward and people started advocating for charter change which happened in 2016-2017 where the new charter a Town Manager and the Board of Selectman turned it down, but people petitioned and got signatures, got it on the ballot and it was voted down again. Then in 2018 they redid the charter with a few amendments, got it on the ballot and it passed. She said there were 2 questions on their ballot. Change to Manager and remove Board of Finance, or keep it as is.

Ms. Goupil said some of the reasons they changed their form of government is one, it became political, there were inconsistencies with policies and procedures, or lack thereof, there were problems with staff retention having gone through 6 Finance Directors in 10 years and lapses where they didn't have one, and they were at their peak with debt so concern was starting to build with all the bonding projects. She said moving forward they currently have a Town Manager and no longer have a Board of Finance and they moved to a 7 member Town Council. She said what has been very interesting in that process is we now have a Town council made up of very few people who ever served at this level of Town Government so that means there's very little understanding of procedures, policies, budgetary timelines and how budgets work. She said it's a heavy load for the Town manager, both to step into the position and understand a municipal budget, but then try to communicate back to the Council members what their

role is and what is an appropriate budget and then mentioned that politics can still be an issue. She went on to say that their Town Manager does not have to live in Town and that is one of the things they struggled with and she thinks reflecting on it that it would have been better to have the Town Manager be a part of the community. Ms. Goupil then said there are pros and cons to both types of government.

Mr. Mednick said he has one question for clarification, your Board of Finance was elected, correct? Ms. Goupil said that's correct.

Mr. Kaye said that was his question and asked if that's why they chose to not have a Board of Finance because they were elected or did you consider changing them to appointed so that you'd still have a financial board? Ms. Goupil said it was a discussion and ultimately because of the way politics were working there was a concern about appointed. There was then little discussion on this.

Mr. Moler asked did they rewrite their charter with a specific goal in mind. Ms. Goupil said the first time there was definitely advocacy through the public and the Charter Committee came to the conclusion that we needed to change to a Town manager form of government. She said the second round there was nothing specific, just that they were growing out of their bridges you could say and felt they needed more professional leadership and communication from that position. There was little discussion on debts and being at the peak.

Mr. Moler asked if they were able to get things inline when they changed their form of government. Ms. Goupil said it started during her term and she did start working on their debt. She went back to their bond agency and moved from one to another and raised their bond rating, which has a lot to do with her being a Project Manager by trade and so she got a lot of the Economic Development Projects off the ground like their train station which was dead in the water but now they're getting a new one which signaled to a developer that he would purchase a property next to it and work with me on a grant for waste water (unintelligible) on that site, and she was able to get the High School property sold to a developer who's been very receptive to working with the public so a number of things signaled to the rating agencies that we were in a good position so we did refinance some of our debt and that was a substantial savings, so it started a process.

Hon. Allen B. Taylor – Hartford Moves from City Manager to Mayor

Mr. Taylor said they've done Charter Revision twice and succeeded it once. He said the first time it was put on the ballot at an off time and you need a certain percentage of electors and they didn't have those numbers than but the second time pretty much that same charter went on the ballot and with enough voters that time it was approved.

Mr. Taylor said the major changes that they made were they have been a City Manager form of government since he thinks 1947 and it really didn't fit the city as its politics changed. He said he was on the City Council and the City BOE and it became clear to him in the course of all that that they couldn't really govern themselves with a Council/Manager government because there always needed to be a strong leader to make things happen and in Hartford's case that strong leader was Nick Carbone, who he

believes doubled as Democratic Town Chair, but it wasn't a smoothly running Council, the Manager was very much controlled by Mr. Carbone, whose motives were good but it's not the way government is supposed to run, and it didn't have much sticking power that way because it was everything that the theoretically professional governance of the City was supposed to assure was colored by the obvious influence of the major power and that continued under the charter.

Mr. Taylor said as mentioned earlier when the charted passed the second time they created a strong Mayor form of governance which has an elected City Council and a combination of elected and appointed BOE members for 4 year terms. He said it seems to work and he's never gotten the sense that anyone wanted to reverse it. He discussed a little why it was done and said he doesn't think a Council/Manager form can manage the level of politicization of the way government has to work because it's so much in the business of dealing with the economic disparities and trying to lessen the impact of those disparities. He said to have a Council/Manager form of government work the electorate really has to understand why the Council's role is different from what it is in a politically run form of government and a Mayor/Council form of government and if it doesn't and if as a result of the electorate not understanding that either initially or over time your elected officials don't understand that than the whole notion that you can professionalize government and take it out of the give and take the tug of politics no longer holds true and what you need in a Hartford, New Haven and Bridgeport is a political strength, the ability to muster the political strength to run a government.

Mr. Taylor said he doesn't know Hamden well enough to know which to recommend in Hamden's situation so all he can say is the theory of a Council/Manager government to depoliticize an administration he thinks is a wonderful theory and thinks it works in many of the municipalities in our State but he doesn't think it would work in any of the cities and certainly didn't work in Hartford at the time he knew the City so you have to decide what fits the political ethos of your community saying if the government itself becomes a means of redistribution within the municipality he thinks you need elected officials; if the municipality and its population are accepting of the idea that the government isn't going to be involved in that level of effect upon everybody's daily lives and economic prospects, but is going to run and administer a governance that just provides safety, clean streets and all the other things that wonderful municipalities do than a Council/Manager form of government he thinks works very, very well.

Mr. Kaye said he'd like to hear a little more about what was said about the Councils role being different under a Town Manager. Mr. Taylor said what they found in Hartford was if the government is not doing favors if distribution of resources is a significant function of the government as opposed to administration of resources then he doesn't think a Council/Manager system will work because the Council can't keep as far away as Council/Manager presupposes from the day to day workings of the government then it needs a strong political figure at the head to protect its fundamental working. Mr. Kaye asked when they were a City Manager system did they have a Mayor? Mr. Taylor said they did have a separately elected Mayor but he didn't have any administrative power.

Ms. Goupil said she'd just like to add that they have the roles well defined in their charter but they're experiencing that folks are interrupting them differently than the ultimate intention so she would say if you go through the process to be more clear than even necessary as to defining the different roles of the

Chair and the rest of the Council, as well as the Manager how they're supposed to communicate to the public, how they're supposed to communicate internally, etc.

Ms. Gallagher asked about term limits and about Mr. DeLong other ideas besides a governance structure that he mentioned that may be helpful with financial issues in Town. After a brief discussion on term limits Mr. DeLong said one thing he's learned in local government here and in other States is that it's amazing how much electorate support you can get if you're only honest with them. He said one thing he thinks that turn people off in politics is that we put together plans to address problems and the plans themselves are sometimes disingenuous. After giving an example he said when you're trying to fix your budget deficit or underfunded liabilities and you're setting them at discount rates that are unreasonable you might as well just quit trying to fix the problem because one, you're never going to fix it, and two, you're going to lose the public's trust and not have public engagement to do the hard decisions because they're never going to see the light at the end of the tunnel.

Mr. DeLong said another thing he thinks that can be looked at in charters, and really is good core governing, is basically saying until you hit a certain funding level is that there can be no benefit enhancements. He said this is something he thinks needs to be looked at because the other thing we see is huge massive unfunded liabilities that we continue to do benefit enhancements on top of which only dig the well a little bit deeper. Mr. DeLong said if you start doing things in charters that kind of drive decision making towards a certain point it takes some of the political pluralization out of it and makes people address things through an honest conversation then he thinks it's easier to get public buy in and also creates a path to do the things that a city or suburb have to do to get on a fiscal sustainable path.

Mr. DeLong said he'd say one last thing and that is don't be afraid of understanding all of the tools in your toolbox. He said we have put ourselves in this position as individuals that we look at things like Chapter 9 Bankruptcy as this horrible, scarring, black eye that politically he would never take his community there, those things can be points of restructuring and you can build things in your charter that says if we get to a certain point we're required to look at this process. He said a great thing about this that can happen is not that you get to Chapter 9 but that people know this is a trigger and it can happen and he thinks people will work better together to come up with a plan.

Mr. Mednick pointed out that a few of the things and issues Mr. DeLong just mentioned have been addressed and said we are moving in the direction of some of those things.

Mr. Taylor mentioned Hartford having a Pension Commission in their charter and said it seems to work well and he would strongly recommend that saying it's something the Council never touched because it made sense to keep it independent. Mr. Mednick said the Hartford Pension Commission was created by Special Act and has very strong Special Act provisions that probably distinguish it from others but another thing he thinks Hartford has is an independently elected Treasurer and has a full time pension and actuarial staff, an auditing staff and whole range of authority and powers and is on equal footing with the Mayor as a City wide elected official. He said most treasurers in the State of CT are check signers and not really full time financial managing positions but for Hartford it's a third wheel of the Mayor, Council, and this Treasurer with the Pension Commission attached to his jurisdiction. Mr. Taylor said that has kept that side of government well run and managed and he would recommend it.

Mr. Cohen said Mr. Taylor mentioned economic disparity and he can see that living here for 20 years saying it's hard to see but there's a lot of it if you really take a good look. He thinks it exists at a fair level and needs to be addressed. Ms. Goupil said as mentioned by Mr. DeLong things can be added to the charter driving towards this and she would suggest it. She mentioned stability, the Plan of Conservation, and goal setting to address this.

Mr. Kaye said the public input that they've received as a commission has been overwhelmingly supportive of a change. He said he doesn't know if that majority is of the electorate or of the people who decided to come to the public input of the commission, but as a commission they're faced with this public input said he'd leave it at that for their opinions.

Mr. DeLong said it starts with one of his first comments and that's what are you trying to change? Is it change for change sake because there's frustration or do you want change because there are certain goals or objectives that need to be met because a lot of times frustration leading to the change of government doesn't do anything to change that frustration there has to be an understanding of what are the opportunities to move forward, what are the issues that aren't being addressed, the past failures, and then you look at does the form of government necessarily matter or does one work best over the other to achieve those goals or objectives. He said it's all about what you're trying to accomplish. He said he doesn't mean anything by this and isn't calling anyone out by name but if there's a segment of people that don't like or don't support the Mayor so they don't want the Mayor form of government is not the reason to make the decision, that's like throwing the baby out with the bathwater. But, if there's a large segment of people that say we need to tackle this issue and are in support of tackling this issue and think a professional has to do it and not an elected official than that's something totally different as long as when that professional is hired they understand that their position was created in form because there was a public desire to take X on whatever that X may be.

Ms. Goupil said for them it was a non-partisan group that really moved this forward, it wasn't from the body of their Charter Reform Committee or any political party and said they were also the ones who brought in the 3 different information sessions advocating for a Town Manager and she thinks this was really pivotal in making the decision for their Town, again looking at the potential of options within an elected position and who would be coming forward to run for it over these phenomenal people engaging in so many levels and were really able to touch on every issue that our community was going to be going through over the next 10 years, and with solutions, she thinks is what was the difference. She said a lot of political people who run don't really have the right solutions they're just talking points and they don't speak to longevity or the ability to accomplish a task over a long period of time.

Mr. Kaye said as a commission they were trying to get as much information out there as possible and as much feedback as possible to try and not have it driven by one group and he thinks that's why having guests such as them is great and he hopes people get a chance to listen to this because it really puts it in a great perspective.

Ms. Gallagher asked how the budget process may or may not change when you have a Town Manager form of government. Ms. Goupil said they got rid of their Board of Finance and that streamlined the

process but the procedure is still the same. The Town Manager is operating the same as the First Selectman would presenting the first round of budget working with staff and making internal decisions and cuts, etc and then bringing it to the Town Council who goes through it with the manager and asks questions of the manage. She said the Board of Finance process is out of it and they did retain the Capital Expenditure Committee's function within theirs.

Mr. Dixon asked with the Board of Finance if they could speak to the term limits and variances. And for the Town Manager being kept out of politics what does that look like for him now as far as the LC side and the Board of Finance?

Ms. Goupil said her Board of Finance was eliminated and they had changed from a Board of Selectman membership of 5 to a 7 member Town Council. She said they moved from a 2 years to a 4 year Council seat and did allow for a staggering of the terms. She said in terms of the politics she thinks the Town Manager has to tread lightly and pretty much do what the super majority are going to want them to do. Mr. Dixon asked did her Board of Finance have term limits. She said it was a 9 member board with 6 year terms. She said for keeping the position as non-political as possible again, she thinks defining the roles are very important.

Mr. Mednick said to Ms. Goupil that she said they have a super majority on their Council and then asked if they have minority party representation in their charter. Ms. Goupil said they do, currently of 7 members they have 2 Democrats, 1 Green Party, 4 Republicans. She said that might be another area you may want to define better. She said it was interesting the way it unfolded and she doesn't think anyone ever considered it happening.

Ms. Downing asked about setting the discount rates for pensions and as they define the role of a Board of Finance is this something they can place on the Board of Finance to set and to monitor. Mr. Mednick said yes, but they should look to see where it goes. He said they should take a look at Hamden's Pension Commission and see if that's the proper place to lodge it, although pensions have to be approved by the Council... he said let's park that and figure out the place to put it.

Mr. DeLong said if you look at some of the best or fully funded or well operating pension plans all across North America in both the U.S. and Canada you will not find a stable pension plan that is using a discount rate above 5 ½ % and told them to keep that in mind.

The commission thanked the panel for being there tonight and giving their input.

CRC Action: Action Item #5 (as Revised) – Budget Process

The commission decided to take care of this item at their next meeting. Mr. Mednick told them to take a look at this document and to really pay attention to page 4 where they establish an Equity Assistance Commission and he just wants to make sure that in looking through all their notes given to him that this covers all of those items they want.

There was a brief discussion about their upcoming schedule and next meeting date and Mr. Mednick talked a little about the following week's panel that would be there.

There being no further business Mr. Dixon requested a motion to adjourn. Moved by Mr. Cohen, seconded by Mr. Kaye and the meeting adjourned at 9:17 P.M.

Respectfully submitted,

Kim Renta
Clerk of the Council