

**TOWN OF HAMDEN, CONNECTICUT**

**CHARTER REVISION COMMISSION**

**MINUTES OF MEETING**

**March 2, 2021**

**\* To view the recording, please click the following link and observe the instructions when/if prompted:**

[https://zoom.us/rec/share/qtvZRMMgqU70aARgV1Rhq2BAPiaX0ysdpp6SIkjC\\_IEbZPUAW7FpAZFnDV1ELZAp.ISZN-y3PS7KdES0g](https://zoom.us/rec/share/qtvZRMMgqU70aARgV1Rhq2BAPiaX0ysdpp6SIkjC_IEbZPUAW7FpAZFnDV1ELZAp.ISZN-y3PS7KdES0g)

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A meeting of the Charter Revision Commission was held on Tuesday, March 2, 2021 via Zoom due to the Covid-19 Pandemic. The meeting was called to order at 7:02 P.M. by the Vice-Chair, Ms. Downing and roll call was taken.

**MEMBERS PRESENT:** Jackie Downing, Vice-Chair; Sarah Gallagher; Myron Hul; Jay Kaye; Todd Moler; Nancy Olson; Todd Berton; Joshua Sprague-Oliveira; Jeff Cohen; Marnie Hebron; Tom Figlar (after roll call); Frank LaDore (after roll call)

**MEMBERS ABSENT:** Tiffany Artis-Wilson; Lamond Battle; Frank Dixon, Chair

**ALSO IN ATTENDANCE:** Steve Mednick, Counsel; John DeStefano, former Mayor of New Haven; Timothy Coon, City Manager of Meriden; Kathleen Buch, Town Administrator of Darien; Ellen Zoppo-Sassu, Mayor of Bristol; John Elsesser, Town Manager of Coventry; Laura Hoydick, Mayor of Stratford; Matthew Hart, Town Manager of West Hartford

**Town Governance Issues: Panel II**

**Ellen Zoppo-Sassu, Mayor of Bristol**

Ms. Zoppo-Sassu started by saying there original Charter was done in 1911 and the last major revision was done in 1969 and since then they've only done patch work on it. She said in the 1930's during the depression, in exchange for funds from the local factory and bank presidents to get them out of the great depression, they had totake a Board of Finance who was appointed by the Mayor, approved by the Council and always outnumber the number of elected officials in the City. She said it's a 9 member body and they started a series of financial improvements in the 30's and 40's that have served the City well today. They put their first pension plan in place and had a very conservative approach and right now today their \$700,000,000 pension is 140% over funded. She said the Board of Finance is still in place today and that they do have a lot more power than the City Council does and there are times when the two entities butt heads but for the most part she thinks it's a respectful balance.

Ms. Zappo-Sassu said one last thing she'd like to throw out as a closing remark is that she's also found that the cycles of Charter revision do reflect on the tensions that are present in the community, and when it's a political discussion, Town Manager/4 year term, it tends to go south pretty quickly. However, when there are not as many community tensions present, it tends to be a better dialogue.

**John Elsesser, Town Manager of Coventry (since 1988)**

Mr. Elsesser said when he got to Coventry they have gone through some unstable years and he promised them 5 years but came to love the community and decided to stay here. He went on to say that Town Managers have a commitment to try and stay a minimum of... going on to say they're not supposed to bounce around it's not fair to the community and that's part of IMCA who have a very strong code of ethics.

Mr. Elsesser said he'd like to talk a little about the pros and cons saying first, there is no one form of Government that is perfect and every form of Government has periods of time where there's more efforts and structure than progress. He said some of the advantages of having a professional administrator of some format, in his opinion, is that it gives some relief to that you can have some stability in your professional staff too. He said in talking with his own department heads, saying theirs are some of the best qualified, he's also found that most say they would only work for a professional administrator. They're afraid of the political influences and the phone calls that say "can you do this for me" and what that does is disrupt the flow of proper governance. He went on to say that professionals and managers are able to work long term, saying he's able to work on long term projects and knows who to call and how to make things work, but this can also work with elected officials who may have a different strength in getting things done.

Mr. Elsesser said in terms of a relationship with the Town Council, he works for the Council which in his Town is 7 members and they do not have a Board of Finance but a sub-committee of the Council which is 3 people with the Council Chair serving as ex-officio and does not vote. He said they also have another sub-committee that works on policy matters and appointments for people. He said in Avon they did have a Board of Finance who sometimes would get into power battles with the Town Council and frankly sometimes in Avon the Board of Finance liked to spend more money than the Council did which got into some issues. He said they have a strong financial background by having longevity and a strong Finance Dept. and they've been able to increase their bonding and their pension fund is not in distress.

Mr. Elsesser said they do have direct election of their budget and it goes to referendum every year and it is difficult but does hold them accountable with the input from the community, so that is there check and balance instead of a Board of Finance. He ended by saying he is firmly committed to the Council/Manager plan saying professional administration in government is critical.

**Kathleen C. Buch, Town Administrator in Darien**

Ms. Buch said in her form of government she is responsible more for staff and day to day operations and the First Selectman is responsible for the bigger picture and deal with the rest. She said the Board of Selectman is a 5 member board and she is basically their staff setting their agendas and preparing all the items for it, and she prepares their budget. She said they do have a Board of Finance and they have an RTM. She said she doesn't staff them but she has a lot of involvement with them.

Ms. Buch said they've had Town Managers since the 80's when it started and she's the 5<sup>th</sup> one. She said they've gone through a couple charter changes in the last 20 years and both failed and in large part because of the strength of the RTM. She said the Town seems very comfortable with this form of government saying she thinks they like the personal nature of a small Board of Selectman and definitely the RTM. She said she thinks this works well for them but does think a lot of it depends on who they elect as First Selectman and what role they're willing to play because she thinks if they didn't have an

active First Selectman as they do now they'd need more staffing or it wouldn't work to just have the Town Administrator.

Mr. Mednick asked how many people are on the RTM and Ms. Buch answered 100. Ms. Downing asked her to define RTM for members of the public. Ms. Buch said its Representative Town Meeting which is rather than having a traditional New England Town meeting where every voter can go and vote we elect 100 people out of 6 districts who are the only ones that can vote but any member of the public can come to the Town meeting and speak but not vote. She said the RTM has multiple communities that divvy up the duties, finance, education, public safety, etc. and they meet about six times a year which makes it a little difficult sometimes to get work done.

### **Timothy Coon, City Manager of Meriden**

Mr. Coon said their last Charter revision was in 1977 and they've only had minor ordinance changes since. He said at the last go-round they created a Council/Manager/Mayor format which is structured that the primary legislative and governing body is the City Council who set the budget, ordinances, and the basic rules of the road. He said the Mayor however does have a little bit more than just a ceremonial function. He is the Chief Elected Official for the City and has responsibility for presiding over the Council and has veto power on budget line items specifically but cannot vote on any resolutions before Council but he can introduce resolutions and ordinances. He said the Council hires him and he reports to them. They set his salary and do a performance evaluation but the Mayor is an intricate part of that process. He said most of their governance is done through a bunch of standing committees saying they have a Finance Committee who are the ones responsible for the primary nuts and bolts of constructing budgets. He then explained how they start their process with departments bringing their budgets to the committee who go over that budget and then it goes to the Council. The committees are only made up of Council members, the Mayor is not a part of any of these committees, but is often present, and he cannot vote in any of these committees, he can only veto line item vetoes.

Mr. Coon said he would say the pro of this structure is that it creates a diluted power structure and the con is that it's a diluted power structure. He said it does take work to accomplish things but in regards to budgets it's very helpful to follow a firm schedule and their charter has a very firm schedule laid out to the day as to when things have to be accomplished.

Mr. Coon said in terms of a Managerial form of government, what he has found is that a professional Manager brings an outside perspective, who can often times be from another community or even another part of the country, and they bring a perspective that is often important and strengthens the knowledge base that exists in a community. He said it's been very effective in Meriden and they've accomplished a great deal in the last few years.

### **John DeStefano, former Mayor of New Haven (1994-2013)**

Mr. DeStefano said he thinks two issues that Hamden and New Haven face are pension and policing. He went on to say that he went to a UCONN MPA Program with the intention of becoming a Town Manager and in his last semester of graduate school a friend got him an interview with New Haven where he became a \$13,000 Budget Analyst, ended up becoming the City Treasurer responsible for the pension funds and debt issuance's, then ended up becoming the City's Budget Director and later moved to a Mayoral Appointee.

Mr. DeStefano said he thinks moving away from a Mayor form of government in Hamden would be an absolute disaster. He spoke about a couple local issues saying people need to figure out how to sort through this stuff and reconcile these differences saying good politics is about listening, learning, engaging and seeking common interest that gets us through tough jobs and he thinks having a Chief Elected Official to provide that type of Leadership and engagement and to be in the trenches with the

community is important. He said and if they don't get it done we have elections which he believes are really important to give citizens the chance to define what's important. He said elections allow us to decide some of these issues and when you remove a Chief Elected Official from an election where it's consequential and meaningful he thinks you lose the opportunity to solve some of these problems.

Mr. DeStefano said he would end by saying he would not put form over substance here. He doesn't think the problem in Hamden is so much form of government as making a better form of government than it is ramping up the quality of politics in Town.

### **Laura Hoydick, Mayor of Stratford**

Ms. Hoydick said she thinks of Stratford and Hamden as sister cities. She said in 2003 they underwent a Town wide referendum to change the form of government from a Council/Manager to a strong Mayor/Council form. She said the structure is that there's an elected Mayor for 4 years, the CAO is selected by the Mayor and that brings professionalism as there's education and experience requirement along with that position, he has half of the direct reports of the departments and she has the other half and so Public Safety is under her realm and all the operations are under his. She said he prepares the budget and also works very closely, as she does, with the Town Council. She said the thing that makes them different from Hamden is that their Council, Land Use Boards and their BOE have term limits and what that does is when you have a one 4 year term to learn how to be what's all right, in a Land Use seat or an education seat, it gives the power or the control to the paid administrator and so when you have a paid professional in those roles it really helps the process.

Mr. Mednick said he's very curious about those term limits and whether or not it was a Special Act or how it is they ended up with term limits. Ms. Hoydick said it was a Special Act provision and it is not in the Charter.

### **Matthew Hart, Town Manager of West Hartford**

Mr. Hart said West Hartford was the first community in the State, and one of the first in the nation, to adopt a Council/Manager form of government back in 1919 and he's the 9<sup>th</sup> Manager in a little over a Century. He said they have a 9 member Council who all serve 2 year terms and they all run at-large. He said following the election they choose one of their own to serve as Mayor and another person as Deputy Mayor and they have roughly 5 or 6 standing committees that do the bulk of the work meeting a couple times a month. They make the big decisions such as adopting the budget, setting the tax rate, review and adopt ordinances and issue bonds. He said he is the only employee that they hire, everyone else is part of Civil Service and they have a few other elected bodies as well like an elected Town Clerk.

Mr. Hart said when he talks about the Council/Manager form to people not familiar with it and how to explain it is that it is a minority form of government in Connecticut and roughly 33 to 35 of the 169 Towns have it but it is a very common form of government nationwide. He said the Council serves as the legislative body and the Town manager serves as the Chief Elected Official. He said there are a couple analogies he likes to use and one is to a private corporation where the Town or City Manager is in many ways equivalent to your corporate CEO usually without quite as much authority and the Council as somewhat analogist a corporate Board of Directors responsible for making the big decisions. He said another analogy he likes to use and he thinks maybe rings more true for most people is that to a School Board and a Superintendent of Schools where the Town or City Council is roughly analogist to a Board of Education and the Town or City manager position is similar in terms of its scope and authority of that of a Superintendent of Schools.

Mr. Hart said he thinks some of the benefits that a Council/Manager form of government provides is one, it was really created and is designed to promote merit based decision making like who's the best employees for the job, who's the best contractor for the job and what's the best land use decision for the

community, with a big focus on these things as well as ethics which is another significant focus. He said as mentioned earlier, this form also promotes stability such as holding things in the mind which can be very useful as Council members come and go, and it provides some continuity to the staff team as well. Mr. Hart said two more things he thinks can be beneficial to this form of government is that the Manager can help bridge partisan issues and lastly the training and professional development opportunities that Town and City Managers have, belonging to a network of professionals within our state, country and internationally.

Mr. Kaye asked Ms. Zoppo-Sassu why she is in favor of a Town Manager and then asked all of the panel who set their mil rate.

Ms. Zoppo-Sassu said the Board of Finance who have complete control over the budget process sets their mil rate, and the Council is not involved at all. She then said she likes a Town Manager form because of the professional management, the emphasis on ethics, and transitional politics even going on to say that different Mayors have different skill sets so they do different things and that can sometimes be difficult.

Mr. Elsesser said the Town Council sets their mil rate.

Ms. Buch said their Board of Finance establishes the mil rate and the RTM can reduce it, but cannot increase it. Mr. Coon said the Town Council sets the mil rate.

Mr. DeStefano said the mayor recommends and the legislative body can reduce.

Ms. Hoydick said the Mayor recommends and the legislative body authorizes and sets the mil rate and tax levy. Mr. Hart said the Town Council sets their mil rate.

Mr. Hul asked Mr. DeStefano to define politics. Mr. DeStefano said any issue with competing demands, and trying to affect consensus. Mr. Hul asked Ms. Hoydick about the difference in the split responsibilities between the Mayor and the CAO and asked why it was structured that way and what the benefits are of it. Ms. Hoydick said they had come from a Council/Manager form of government where you had a professional Town Manager and they moved to a Mayor who appointed the CAO and those on the charter committee felt very strongly that that professional manager have a role with the Mayor so that they could share some of the duties.

Mr. Hul then asked who provides the vision for their Towns. Mr. Hart said in a Council/Manager form of government that's the responsibility of the Council. Mr. Elsesser said they spend a lot of time establishing goals and objectives in their budget to be voted on by the Council.

Mr. Cohen asked Mr. DeStefano why he thinks it would be a disaster for Hamden to move away from the Mayor form of government. Mr. DeStefano said he thinks going through an election cycle every 2 years as a City wide official forced him to be responsible to his community and to address concerns that were on their minds, and so he thinks elections force them to be responsible. Mr. Cohen asked if he thinks from his experience that a Mayoral system as opposed to a Town Manager system makes the Mayor more accountable or responsible. Mr. DeStefano said no, what makes a Mayor and Council responsible are the voters.

Mr. Elsesser said in terms of accountability most managers have some type of Employment Agreement and he can be asked to leave with 5 votes on any meeting called for that, so if they're not happy with his performance or think he's not best for the will of the public, 5 votes and he's out.

Mr. Hart said with respect to accountability, yes, they typically have a contract with the Town and can be fired with or without cause and in most cases serve at the will or pleasure of the Council and with sufficient votes can remove them. But, he said, he'd like to answer it differently. He thinks one thing a professional Manager can bring is, a Manager serves as the Council's chief adviser and they can help

explain to a Council and help with a major policy decision and tell why in their opinion the idea is a good idea or a poor idea, and they can also when needed say no and explain why something would be a poor decision for the community.

Ms. Buch said she worked in government a long time and always felt like it was part of her job to tell them what she thinks the right thing to do was and then support their decision as long as it's legal and ethical. She said one of the advantages they have as Manager is that they don't have to run for reelection and can sometimes advise decisions or choices that are not as popular and the elected officials can hide behind them as the person making that decision and yes they can be fired.

Mr. Coon said a very important concept associated with accountability is transparency and one of the strengths of the Manager form of government is to maintain transparency and a City Manager can smooth out the edges on one side or the other and encourage, maintain and foster a real sense of transparency because of the ability of preventing things from going off the rails.

Ms. Hoydick said if you're a Mayor that wants to stay in office and you're not sure how the political wind is blowing it does you well to work with both sides of the aisle on getting things passed.

Ms. Gallagher asked how the role of Agency Head's change with a Town Manager. She also asked how relationships with other joint community issues coming together for and regionalization under a Town manager would change or work.

Mr. Elsesser said he thinks that working with other Towns and regions can be done by both elected and appointed officials saying a little more longevity sometimes makes some of those relationships easier and can also eliminate some political issues getting things done or established quicker. He said he feels part of his job is going to Hartford and lobbying for the things that are important to the Council and to the community. He said for the first question, as he said earlier, he's had professionals tell him they won't work for a Mayor because they're not political beings and don't want to play that.

Mr. Coon said he feels one of the strengths of the Managerial form is that the Manager is able to give direct focus to the Agency Heads that sometime gets diluted if there are multiple powers that can exist in a faction based upon political alignments.

There was a brief discussion about CCM and SCROG representation as well as a brief discussion on term limits.

Mr. Kaye asked Ms. Hoydick if during budget time does she get together with the Board of Ed, Legislative Council and to just describe how the process there works. Ms. Hoydick said the communication doesn't just start at budget time, it always happens, so you already have an idea of what the constituents want and what to advocate for. The Chief Administrative Officer and Finance Director craft the budget, we review it, massage it and then present it to the Council. She then explained how they hold workshops and public forums as the changes are being made and the budget is set. Mr. Kaye asked how important the Chief Administrative Officer position was in her opinion to share this work or role with. Ms. Hoydick said it's critical and so very important and doesn't think she would be as an effective of a Mayor without a CAO.

Mr. Kaye asked Mr. Coon if his Finance Committee was made up of just Council members or if there were public appointees as well. Mr. Coon said it's just Council members and is a committee of 5 and is set at the start of every Council session every two years.

Mr. Kaye asked Ms. Buch if she interacts with the Board of Finance. Ms. Buch said she personally doesn't unless she has an actual item in front of them. Mr. Kaye asked how her their role in the budget. She said she prepares a budget, the Board of Selectman revises that budget, and then the First Selectman presents that budget to the Boardof Finance who will hold a public hearing, maybe make revisions to it, and then turn it over to the Representative Town Meeting. Mr. Kaye asked if any of them said that after the referendum process their mil rate or tax levy canbe adjusted by vote or... Ms. Buch jumped in saying that for theirs the Town meeting can reduce the mil rate fromwhat the Board of Finance recommended.

Mr. Hul asked when you have a fragmented Council, regardless of R's and D's, how you deal with a disruption and bring a consensus to that type of form of government to get things done. Mr. Hart said it certainly does happen and here in Connecticut we're somewhat unique in that at the local government level that our City and municipal Councilor's run based on their party affiliation and that actually is not the norm nationwide, most City Council's across the country do not run on a party basis. He went on to say to Mr. Hul's point that it's not always based on partisan politics either saying sometimes even within a particular caucus there may be dissension, rivalries, issues, etc. so he thinks whoever is leading the group it's important for the Town or City Manager, it's important for the Mayor and important for the City Administrator to recognize it and engage in some things to try to address it. Following an election he thinks it's important to try to build a sense of teamwork, conducting a goodthorough orientation ideally in a public session, a goal setting session can help, he also thinks it's important for Majority and Minority Leaders of the two caucuses to talk and to talk often. He also thinks it's good for the City Manager to maintain a good working relationship with all Councilors.

**APPROVAL OF PREVIOUS MINUTES – February 17, 2021 – Ms. Downing** said before they adjourn tonight she wants to do approval of the minutes that she skipped over earlier on the agenda. She then requested a motion to approve the minutes from the meeting held February 17,2021. Moved by Mr. Kaye, seconded by Mr. Figlar and approved unanimously.

There being no further business Ms. Downing requested a motion to adjourn. Moved by Mr. Figlar, seconded byMr. Cohen and adjourned at 9:27pm.

Respectfully submitted,

Kim Renta  
Clerk of the Council