

CHARTER COMMISSION

Robert Russell, Chairman
Michael Kaelin, Vice Chairman



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TOWN HALL
238 Danbury Road
Wilton, CT 06897

CHARTER COMMISSION

June 12, 2008

Meeting Room "B"
Wilton Town Hall

PUBLIC HEARING

PRESENT: Robert Russell, Michael Kaelin, Alice Ayers, Paul Burnham, Marilyn Gould, Louise Herot, Toni Lee, Douglas Levene **ABSENT:** Chris Weldon

OTHERS: First Selectman William Brennan, Selectman Richard Creeth, Selectman Ted Hoffstatter, Peggy Reeves, Ernest Loser, Sharon Grace, John Kalamarides, Dick Dubow, Peter Kaskell, Fred Herot, Karen Birck

Brian Shea (Bulletin) and Frank MacEachern (Villager)

Chairman Bob Russell called the public hearing to order at 7:00 pm. to hear public comment on the Wilton Town Charter.

Chairman Russell stated that the Charter is the set of rules under which the Town of Wilton operates. Until 1962, Wilton did not have a Charter and operated under the rules that are provided in the State Statutes. Many small Connecticut towns still do not have Charters. The first Charter in Wilton in 1962 increased the Board of Selectmen from 3 to 5 members, made the Board of Finance elective instead of appointive and retained the Town Meeting form of government. There were revisions in 1971, 1981, 1992. In 1992, there were three major changes – ordinance making powers were transferred to the Board of Selectmen for almost everything, which simplified the process of passing local laws. Term limits were set for Boards, except for the Board of Selectmen. And, a mandatory automatic referendum was added for the Town budget every year. Prior to that it required a petition to have a referendum. It has been 17 years since the Charter was last reviewed. When a Charter Commission is established, the commission has the obligation of looking at everything in the Charter, not just the list of items provided by the Board of Selectmen.

The floor was then opened for public comment.

Richard Creeth (member of the Board of Selectmen) stated that the BOS went through the Charter in some detail and presented a report of things we feel you should look at. He feels strongly about a few things, i.e. staggered terms for the Board of Selectmen and making the case for a Town Manager. He feels these are important because in 2005, he was facing first re-election to the BOS and because of a contested First Selectman race that year, Alice and he were the two Democratic incumbents on the Board of Selectmen. He realized that if he pulled more votes than Alice, he would be the longest serving incumbent. Anyone who has served on the BOS will tell you that it takes a year to begin to understand the job. It would have to be four year terms, staggered every two years. Regarding a town manager, he has served under two excellent First Selectmen. A First Selectman needs to understand municipal management, union negotiations, municipal accounting, land use issues, how to interact with the state and maximize revenue from the state and to run a \$100 million "corporation". Wilton has now grown to a size where he believes a town manager would be a smart move. A qualified Town Manger would not be cheap.

William Brennan, First Selectman stated that certain people who have been in this job have had \$100 million responsibilities in their corporate career. We have to be very confident in the people that we put up that they do have the qualifications. There is a wide variety of business decisions to be made. He has always been pleased with the level of talent in this town.

Peggy Reeves, 56 Hemmelskamp Road (Registrar) stated that she was part of a League study group on town government. The study was done because we were concerned about low attendance at town meetings and wondered if the present structure of town government could be improved. The town meeting form of government continues to be the most used form of government in Connecticut. There are many reasons why it may not work as the town grows. The National League of Cities cites that when the population of a town is over 10,000 people that it may be time to look at other structures than town meeting form. Most popular is a town manager/council or a town manager/board of selectmen. A town manager has professional experience and a degree in public policy. It would be necessary to have a good contract so person could be hired and fired at will. They must be constantly responsible to the Council. Avon made the switch long ago. In the town of Simsbury, the First Selectman feels it is time to change. She is delighted that we have a Charter Commission because this does not happen very often. Right now, 8-9% of the town is determining what the town is doing. There is no participation. She would advocate a representative Town Meeting. You can always call for a referendum on a budget. You don't remove the power of the referendum. The council would be legislative body of the town.

Sharon Grace, Nod Hill Road, does not advocate for a town manager. She enjoys going to town meetings. She does think that a town manager might increase participation in elections because if you know that you don't have to leave your current job to be the CEO of Wilton, then more people would be willing to run, which means more contested races.

Bill Brennan – I think everyone would like to have 25-30% participation but this doesn't seem to happen if there isn't a significant issue. When you have weak participation it can be interpreted as satisfaction with the job that the Board of Finance, Board of Education and Board of Selectmen are doing. If we had come to the town and said we wanted to increase taxes 8% - 10%, we would have participation.

Ted Hoffstatter (Board of Selectmen) - agrees with most of what Bill said but no one says I have a real problem, we need to change the charter. A lot of people come to him and ask why we usually have one person running for First Selectman. Most people don't understand that there is also competition within the party. Unless you know the Charter, you won't see that.

Sharon Grace, Nod Hill Road – has not served on any of the boards but actually likes the people running the town coming up for vote every two years, particularly the First Selectman. It also can help the First Selectman know how he or she is doing. It is valuable to go to voters more often.

Michael Kaelin asked the public – What is so bad about low voter turnout? From his perspective, we have about 10,000 registered voters so even if only 9% go to the polls, that's 900 people participating in the democratic process. A Representative Town Meeting cuts out the people who do want to get involved when there is a reason to get involved. Just because people don't go out to vote isn't necessarily a bad thing but actually indicates approval.

Peggy Reeves - I know there are a lot of older people in town who have said to me that they have given up. They feel that they are afraid to stand up and speak.

Bill Brennan – a Town Manager would be an employee of the town. They tend to be more respectful of certain things rather than taking leadership. A chief elected officer is there to make things happen, to make change and do what he thinks is best. An employee is different than an elected official.

Dick Dubow – Be careful not to assume that low voter turnout is an indication of dissatisfaction.

Richard Creeth – if you have a town manager, the chief elected official would be no less important. It would be more like a Chairman of the Board role. You hire a town manager specifically for their training and experience in running a municipality, which none of our elected first selectmen have before being elected.

Bill Brennan – the one key thing that a town manager brings is continuity. If you have a good town manager, who knows the town and hopefully lives here, the continuity is good because the manager is not running for office every two years.

Bill Brennan thanked everyone who has volunteered to serve on this commission. It is a lot of work. The BOS went through the Charter word for word and there many things that need to be clarified. We are confident in your judgment.

Hearing no further comment, the public hearing was closed at 7:45 p.m.

SPECIAL MEETING

Following the close of the public hearing a special meeting was called to order.

Minutes

Paul Burnham moved to approve the minutes of the May 22, 2008 meeting as presented. Motion seconded and unanimously carried.

Review and discussion of comments from public hearing.

Copies of the organizational chart of the town departments were distributed to all members. Louise Herot had taken the comments from the Board of Selectmen and interweaved them into the Charter. Color copies will be made for all members.

It was decided to break into three subgroups at some time with each subgroup working on three articles of the Charter. Each subgroup can set their own meeting dates to address the questions raised by the Selectmen. The commission will then get back together to discuss the recommendations of each subgroup.

Before the commission divides into subgroups, it was decided to invite the following to speak to the entire group: Chairman Bob Russell will try to schedule.

- Rudy Marconi, First Selectman of Ridgefield
- Natalie Ketcham, First Selectman of Redding
- Jeb Walker, First Selectman of New Canaan
- Phil Schenck, Town Manager of Avon
- Joseph Dolan, Wilton CFO
- Sarah Taffel, Wilton Director of Human Resources, Labor Relations and Administrative Services
- At some point, town counsel Ken Bernhard will need to be involved.

It was suggested getting copies of Charters from other towns of similar demographics. Chairman Russell will ask CCM (CT Conference of Municipalities) to research and outline the various options that we have and the organization of each of them. It was also suggesting requesting information on the financial performance of the different types of organizations.

After lengthy discussion, future meetings were scheduled for June 24, July 2, July 10 and August 11 at 7:00 pm.

Having no further business, the meeting was adjourned at 8:35 p.m.

Jan Andras, Clerk

(Not present. Minutes taken from audio recording)