

CHARTER COMMISSION

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TOWN HALL
238 Danbury Road
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CHARTER COMMISSION

July 10, 2008

Meeting Room "B"

Wilton Town Hall

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

GUESTS: Rudy Marconi, Ridgefield First Selectman, William Brennan, Patrice Gillespie

OTHERS: Brian Shea (Wilton Bulletin)

Chairman Bob Russell called the meeting to order at 7:10 p.m. and introduced Mr. Rudy Marconi.

Rudy Marconi, Ridgefield First Selectman

Mr. Marconi advised that Ridgefield has a population of approximately 24,500, with 15,000 registered voters. He distributed copies outlining the changes that Ridgefield made during their last Charter Revision in 2006.

A Town Meeting is called by the Board of Selectmen upon receipt of a petition for expenditures – this is now broken out by dollar amount. Up to \$250,000, the petition must be signed by 2% of the electors. For matters above \$250,000, the petition requires signatures of 5% of electors. Any matter not involving expenditures requires 2% of total voters. Three or four Town Meetings are held each year.

It is not difficult to get 750 signatures. It's amazing how willing people are to sign anything. During the previous Annual Budget, the conversion of a playing field to a synthetic surface was voted down as a capital question. It was brought back under petition and submitted to the Board of Selectmen which upset a lot of people that so soon after a request for an appropriation failed, that someone would be allowed to bring it right back. They will be revisiting that. His advice

would be to put a time limit on when a petition could bring back a denied appropriation. They plan to require one year.

A change was made regarding vacancies on elected offices, boards and commissions. In the event an elected position becomes vacant due to a tendered written resignation or other cause, the appointing authority, within 30 days, shall by majority vote appoint an interim replacement for the unexpired portion of the term or until the next regular election. Within 7 days of said vacancy, notice shall be given by the BOS in a newspaper publication. Ridgefield had a person who was serving as (elected) Tax Collector who announced her retirement and resigned mid-term. The old Charter said that the BOS could not act until ten days after the vacancy which meant that they would be working without a tax collector and the tax collector has to sign off on any lien releases. In Ridgefield, elected offices include the First Selectman, Tax Collector, Town Clerk, Town Treasurer, and two Registrars.

Clarification was made to language regarding the Treasurer in that an Asst. Treasurer would be appointed within 30 days of his/her election.

No big changes were made in the budgetary process.

Ridgefield did put a restriction on multiple elected offices. No person shall hold more than one elected office in the town of Ridgefield at one time.

They also wanted to clarify that the Board of Finance's responsibility is to review the budget as a whole instead of getting into line items. They would call department heads in to discuss individual line items and then reduce the budget based on what they like or did not like with respect to the Selectmen's budget. That was a clear violation of the previous Charter. They wanted to inject language that made it more clear that the BOF discuss the budget as a whole. Any changes made to the municipal operating budget by the BOF shall be limited to the budget as a whole rather than from the limited viewpoint of any one department.

With the BOE, they now require submission of a three-year operating and capital budget forecast to the BOF. The BOE did not want to do that but the town wants to get more serious about forecasting so that when a budget is approved, we have an idea of what is coming within the next two years. That is now a requirement in the Charter.

Ridgefield votes separately on the municipal and education budgets. Both failed this past year. There were also eight capital questions on the ballot. Only one passed and that was a question about paving roads which passed by 41 votes. One major item that failed was renovation to the police station - \$4 million for a facility to carry through the next 20 years.

The Town Meeting had become more of a formality in the budget process. People were not attending. They changed the process – the annual capital and operating budgets of the BOS and BOE as recommended by the BOF are brought to the Town Meeting for discussion and then sent to referendum. The Town Meeting cannot reduce a budget.

During the year, special appropriations go to the Town Meeting. The BOS vote to approve, determine the date, and send to the BOF for approval. If they approve, it comes back to BOS to

set the date for the Town Meeting. Anything over \$2 million has to go to referendum. Less than that can be brought to the Town Meeting.

Ridgefield has a Capital Reserve Account. The two fire stations planned to install an exhaust recovery system for which \$225,000 was approved, but it ended up costing \$150,000. The difference is now unexpended in the capital account. At the July 31 meeting, they will vote to close the account out. It then goes to the Town Meeting to vote whether to transfer unexpended funds into the Capital Reserve Account, where funds are used for unanticipated capital expenditures.

They have a Contingency Fund of \$50,000. When he was first elected, it was \$600,000. He felt that since there is a Fund Balance, a Capital Reserve Fund, and a relatively quick process to obtain approval for use of funds, a large contingency was not necessary.

The BOS, Town Clerk, Tax Collector, Treasurer and BOF serve four year terms – not staggered. There are no term limits for any boards. He feels that no one in Ridgefield's government has unilateral authority so four years is not too long to wait to end the term of an elected official, if the voters want to replace that person. Only administrative decisions are made on a day to day basis.

The BOS does not have ordinance making authority – only the Town Meeting. Town Meeting notices can be published in the newspaper and held 15 minutes prior to the Board of Selectmen meeting. There is not usually a large turn out for ordinance approvals. Anyone can try to repeal an ordinance a year after it is approved – although that has never happened.

The BOF, in any fiscal year, without a vote of the Town Meeting, can provide any single request from an agency with a special appropriation from the general fund, unreserved, undesignated fund balance for a sum not to exceed \$50,000. The total of what the BOF can do is limited to \$250,000.

Before revisions to the Charter were put to a vote in 2006, an explanatory text was sent out to everyone in the town.

Previously, the BOS was never involved in the BOE process. The BOS budget always went directly to the BOF. People look at the First Selectman as the CEO of the town and would not accept that he has no say in 2/3 of the budget. There was a lot of debate. The agreement within the Charter Revision group was to allow the BOS to have a non-binding recommendation to the Board of Finance regarding the BOE budget. It is then put together to determine the impact to the taxpayer because the people should know whether the First Selectman agrees or disagrees with the BOE budget. This has worked fine for the past two years it has been in place.

The agreement with the BOE is that the Town be responsible for the outside of the school buildings, and the BOE is responsible for the interior of the buildings.

The Charter Revision group discussed changing the Town Meeting form of government but retained it in order to keep direct involvement of the public with the chief elected official. A town manager would be less available to the public and not directly responsible to the public.

Mr. Marconi was thanked for taking the time to speak with the Commission and left the meeting.

It was decided to send written requests to the chairpersons of other Boards and Commissions to see if there are things they would like to see changed in the Charter.

Mr. Russell handed out copies of the last bond offering statement from Joe Dolan. This contains a lot of demographic data.

Approval of Minutes: Upon motion by Ms. Gould, the minutes of the July 2, 2008 meeting were unanimously approved with minor amendments as discussed.

Future Meetings: The next meeting date is August 11 with First Selectman Jeb Walker from New Canaan. Members were encouraged to look at New Canaan's Charter on-line before the meeting. New Canaan has a Town Council as well as a Board of Selectmen. The First Selectman has a lot of power – he appoints the Board of Finance members and is the chairman. There is no Town Meeting. There is a process to call a Town Meeting but the budget is basically approved by the Town Council. They also have an administrative officer.

At the August 26 meeting, First Selectman Brennan will be present. Chairman Russell distributed a summary of the Board of Selectmen's recommendations with his own comments and recommendations added and asked Commission members to study this during the next month before we meet again and add their own ideas for changes.

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

Jan Andras

Clerk (Not present. Minutes taken from audio recording)