



Town of Bolton

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CHARTER REVISION COMMISSION THURSDAY, APRIL 16, 2020 7:00 P.M. – VIRTUAL SPECIAL MEETING MINUTES

The April 16, 2020 meeting of the Charter Revision Commission was called to order at 7:05 PM.

ROLL CALL

MEMBERS PRESENT: Chair Gwen Marrion, Vice Chair Eleanor Georges, Adam Teller, Richard Hayes, Jay Brudz, Jim Aldrich, and John Toomey.

MEMBERS ABSENT: None

OTHERS PRESENT: Pam Sawyer, Selectman Robert Morra, and Town Administrative Assistant Michael Stankov.

AGENDA ITEM 2 – PUBLIC COMMENT

Chair Gwen Marrion requested public comment, but none was brought forward.

AGENDA ITEM 3 – DISCUSSION WITH BOB MORRA, SELECTMAN, TOWN OF BOLTON

DISCUSSION: R. Morra offered his help and how he could answer any questions. G. Marrion asked Mr. Morra to detail his experience in town and how the Board of Selectmen (BoS) works and interacts with the Board of Finance (BoF).

R. Morra spoke at length about the role of the Board of Finance's current power as of the most recent charter revision, which was "the ability to add or subtract to the elements of the town budget". Because the role of the BoF has been, in his view, reduced over the years, R. Morra is of the opinion that the BoF could be consolidated with other Administrative functions in the town to reduce redundancy in the budget approval process as well as reduce the level of politicking in the budget approval. He also touted the benefit of reducing the number of individuals who are required for the budget approval process, as it has become increasingly difficult to find sufficient individuals to staff all of the boards.

R. Hayes asked R. Morra about when the Board of Selectmen was only 3 people, and the "difficulties" of that time. R. Morra spoke about the difficulties of having a much smaller staff at the time, and how having a larger 5 person board let the board spread out responsibilities and reduce burden on each selectman, as being a good selectman requires a significant time investment.

R. Hayes asked R. Morra if movement to a Strong First Selectman model of government with an adequate wage would make the government more efficient and effective. R. Morra was uncertain as to whether or not a Strong First selectman model should usurp a full time administrative position, as there is significant benefit to having a full time professional in a community the size of Bolton. Morra also spoke to the value of having enough compensation for the first selectman such that a wider pool of potential applicants could be drawn to the

position. Speaking to the general stress of these positions, Morra mentioned again the benefit of expanding both the Board of Finance and the Board of Selectmen. Either more funding or a larger board would help to reduce stress on these high importance positions, but R. Morra did not feel strongly about which

A. Teller asked about whether or not the members of the Board of Finance would come to the Board of Selectmen meetings when the BoS was debating budgets. R. Morra said that there was rarely more than 1. A Teller remarked that this was similar to what he had heard of regarding Board of Education (BoE) members attending other Board meetings that were relevant. R. Morra admitted that it did feel like an inefficiency that these boards were not communicating. A. Teller mentioned that he feels that the idea of the BoF being a “check and balance” against the BoS doesn’t make sense, and that this is evidence of that fact – the BoF doesn’t have different interests than the BoS, and they don’t seem deeply interested in the function of the other board. R. Morra said that ultimately, regardless of any rivalry between the BoF and the BoS, the ultimate arbiter of how town finances are spent is the voter due to the referendum process.

E. Georges asked R. Morra about how a longer term for a Selectman might affect the running of the town. R. Morra stated that a 4 year term might be better than a 2 year term to ensure that programs and projects that get started actually get finished. Additionally, R. Morra feels that a staggered election, where only some of the board is reelected during each election cycle, would ensure maintenance of institutional knowledge.

J. Brudz asked how R. Morra feels about a town having a Town Administrator vs a Town Manager. R. Morra said that he feels that a Town Administrator is fundamentally a servant to the people of the town via the various boards. Meanwhile, a Town Manager is a more bureaucratic position that is disconnected from the people of the town and may open up politicians to “pass the buck” on responsibility to the Manager.

J. Aldrich asked R. Morra about the attitudes of the other selectmen towards eliminating the BoF. R. Morra said that the general feeling on the BoS was that the town was small enough that the BoF is an inefficiency that can be eliminated.

J. Aldrich asked about the BoS’ position on shared financial services between the town and the board of education. R. Morra said that this was more complicated, as the Board of Education has been historically territorial regarding its financing. Despite this, R. Morra holds that because of ever rising costs, having a full time finance officer in both the town office and the board of education may not be feasible in the long term.

G. Marrion asked J. Toomey if he had any questions for R. Morra, but Toomey declined. He stated that he largely agreed with R. Morra that the Board of Finance is a redundancy that can be eliminated and ensured to the Boards of Education and the Board of Selectmen.

G. Marrion asked R. Morra about what he would say the role of the BoF is currently. R. Morra said that he felt that the BoF’s role is to examine what the town needs and to interpret the requests of the BoE and the BoS. G. Marrion asked whether or not the elimination of the Board of Finance would be removing a third party check on town spending and could be seen as weakening the position of the Board of Education, since their budget would now be approved by the Board of Selectmen (who have a vested interest in holding on to the town budget as opposed to the school budget. R. Morra said that while that is a valid concern, the school budget could just as easily be destroyed by the election of many individuals to the current boards who want to cut the school budget. Similarly, the electorate also holds the power to ensure that it only elects officials who want to maintain the school budget. In his opinion, the issue is likely to resolve itself by electing individuals who reflect the views of the townsfolk.

G. Marrion asked R. Morra if the BoF was just a redundancy and inefficiency, or if its existence was actively hindering the process of budgeting. R. Morra said that the BoF mostly exists to decide what people are willing to spend. A. Teller mentioned that that was what the town budget referendum is for. R. Morra agreed, and said that at BoF meetings, one topic of conversation that regularly arose was whether or not an approved budget could get through the public referendum.

E. Georges asked R. Morra if he could speak to the BoS' ability to appoint individuals to other Boards, such as the Zoning Board, rather than having them be elected officials. R. Morra said that this was an interesting topic as it is handled differently in many communities, and he cannot remember exactly how Bolton has always handled this in the past. He recommended speaking to the elected officials of other towns who currently have those boards existing as appointed positions to get their opinion on the matter.

R. Morra thanked the board for their time, and left the meeting at 8:01 PM.

AGENDA ITEM 4 – Act on the Minutes of the February 11 public hearing and meeting and the March 12 special meeting

DISCUSSION: G Marrion asked whether or not the board was intending to vote on accepting the meeting minutes. J Brudz and A. Teller mentioned that the board wanted seconds.

MOTION: Motion made by A. Teller, seconded by J. Brudz, to approve the February 11 public hearing and meeting minutes. R. Hayes asked whether or not the board was allowed to go into executive session to discuss personnel matters, as J. Toomey claimed that this was not the case at the Feb 11 meeting. A. Teller stated that the CRC cannot go into executive session to discuss personnel matters because the CRC does not have personnel. G. Marrion suggested that an amendment be made to reflect this clarification. J Brudz stated that in unanimous agreement, a change can be made to the meeting minutes.

G. Marrion made an amendment to the minutes to add the sentence “it was determined that it would be inappropriate for the Committee to go into executive session.” The commission unanimously agreed to this amendment.

VOTING IN FAVOR: Unanimous.

MOTION: Motion made by A. Teller, seconded by R. Hayes, to approve the March 12 special meeting minutes.

VOTING IN FAVOR: Unanimous.

AGENDA ITEM 5 – Continuing Business: Review of Town Charter

DISCUSSION: G. Marrion asked the board to keep its discussion to the importance of the Board of Finance, and try not to stray into the topic of Form of government.

A. Teller stated that the Board of Finance is not necessarily better informed than the boards that crafted the budgets, are not necessarily able to improve the quality of the budget, or to explain it better to the public. The existence of the board of finance, in his view, does not create checks and balances and does not improve transparency and information. IF the BoF was sitting beside the two other boards as the budget was crafted and reporting to the public they would fulfill an important role, but as it stands that is not what happens. The BoF is not necessarily more informed than the general public in A. Teller's view, and in that case they are not doing anything particularly important.

J. Aldrich stated that many individuals have been interviewed regarding the BoF, but even so would like to make sure that all stakeholders in the process have been consulted before the CRC moves forward with any steps concerning the potential elimination of the BoF.

J. Toomey noted that despite his past service on the BoF, he also felt that the ultimate arbiter of the budget was the town referendum and that the elimination of the BoF would not eliminate the checks and balances that it is supposed to provide.

G. Marrion spoke about how the Town of Portland had a situation in the past where several individuals were wondering why Portland had eliminated its Board of Finance. A case was made that the BoF was only a thorn in the side of the government of the town when it was trying to be efficient. Portland was also noted by A. Teller to be able to increase or decrease its budget if the budget is defeated in referendum, which differs from the model in Bolton. Jay Brudz mentioned that only being able to decrease a budget after a referendum defeat was unique to Bolton, but R. Hayes disputed this, stating that Hebron had an identical model.

R. Hayes pivoted the topic of budgeting to mention several intricacies of the Board of Education budgeting process, including state legal provisions to prevent the school budget from decreasing across years and large fixed costs for staff salaries and benefits that cannot change. The removal of the BoF, though it may appear to be exposing the BoE to major budget cuts, would not immediately expose the BoE to major slashes to its budget.

G. Marrion and J. Toomey mentioned that it would be important to get important individuals in the school system to speak to this body before any finite decisions were made.

R. Hayes spoke about the existence of the “2+2+2”, a set of meetings with 2 individuals from the BoF, BoE, and BoS to collectively discuss budgeting, but believed that they had been discontinued. G. Marrion mentioned that she had heard those were very effective, but had to be discontinued because of legal reasons that she could not precisely name.

A. Teller mentioned that R. Hayes’ assertion that school budgets could not be cut was not technically true, but it was very hard to cut a school budget.

J Aldrich mentioned that his letter several months ago was intended to provide the board with more economic data such that they could understand the importance of the BoF in Bolton in relation to similar towns of this size. M. Stankov mentioned that he would be happy to continue to track down whatever data the CRC requested.

G. Marrion asked the commission if they would like the whole board to meet with the Superintendent of Schools Kristin Heckt and the Director of Finance and Budgeting for Bolton Public Schools Kusal Huynh or only a subcommittee. After discussion, the board decided that they would plan only around the schedules of A. Teller, R Hayes, and J. Brudz, but would be open to all members coming.

G. Marrion broached the topic of whether or not the CRC would like to publish short summaries/ public updated about the progress of the CRC. R. Hayes promoted the idea for being transparent. J Aldrich mentioned that it would be good to report to the public about all of the minor changes being done by this body. E. Georges agreed. G. Marrion mentioned that she would be willing to write these summaries.

AGENDA ITEM 6 – Correspondence

DISCUSSION: None.

AGENDA ITEM 7 – Other

DISCUSSION: E. Georges requested that the next meeting be in-person. The commission conferred and reached the conclusion that they would be willing to consider it, but would have to wait to see the situation with the COVID-19 virus at the time of the May 21 meeting.

The meeting was adjourned at 8:40 PM.

Respectfully submitted,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "M. Stankov", with a horizontal line extending to the right from the end of the signature.

Michael Stankov, Administrative Assistant

See minutes of subsequent meetings for approval of these minutes and any corrections hereto.