

BLOOMFIELD TOWN CHARTER REVISION COMMISSION

There was a regular meeting of the above referenced subcommittee held on Thursday, June 20, 2024, at 7:00 p.m. in Council Chambers at Bloomfield Town Hall, 800 Bloomfield Avenue, Bloomfield, CT.

Commission Members: Joseph Suggs, Chair, Dwight Bolton, Elvin Turner, Bradley Klein and Erica Coleman

Others present (in-person): Attorney Andrew Crumbie, Attorney Lawrence Widem, Crumbie Law Group, LLC and India Rodgers, Clerk of Council

Virtual Attendance: Councilor Todd Cooper

The meeting was called to order at 7:05 p.m.

Additions to the Agenda

It was moved by Commissioner Turner, seconded by Commissioner Bolton and voted unanimously to add an agenda item: Discussion and Possible Action regarding Scheduling a Special Meeting at the Alvin and Beatrice Human Services Center, 330 Park Avenue.

Public Comments

In-Person:

There were no members of the public present to speak.

Virtual:

1. Nancy Bowden, 7 Scotland Road commented on the need to eliminate titles of Mayor and Deputy Mayor. She recommended using Chair or Vice-Chair as a business-like approach and less ceremonial with the official elected titles.

Review and Discussion of Council Charges to the Commission

(Chapter 3 –The Council, Section 308 (Referendum on certain ordinances and certain appropriations), Section 309 (Emergency appropriation resolution), Section 310 (Obligatory referendum on bond issues and appropriations), Chapter 5 – Appointive Officers, Section 501 (Appointments by Council – Town Attorney and Boards/Commissions)

Chairman Suggs introduced the Council charges for Commission discussion included: Chapter 3 – The Council (Sections 308, 309 and 310) and Chapter 5 – Appointive Officers (Sections 501).

Chapter 3 – The Council

Council Charge: Potential change of language regarding compensation

Section 308 - Referendum on certain ordinances and certain appropriations

Chairman Suggs mentioned that there are 17,125 electors in the Town of Bloomfield, approximately 7.5% of these electors would require 1,284 signatures to force a referendum.

He noted that the Commission did receive some public comments regarding this topic. Several individuals noted that 2.5% of these electors would be sufficient and require only 428 signatures to force a referendum.

Discussion

Commissioner Turner requested clarification regarding any reference in the current Town Charter relative to a budget referendum. There is no budget referendum language in the current Town Charter. He also asked for clarification regarding the referendum timeline to collect signatures as noted in Section 307 and Section 308.

Attorney Larry Widem of Crumbie Law Group, LLC stated that the Commission can authorize to modify and include language in the Town Charter that references budget referendums.

Attorney Widem noted that the Town of Bloomfield is a one petition town for referendums. The Commission may want to consider two or multiple referendums. Attorney Widem also explained that the minimum 10 days is required for the newspaper publication. It is up to 60 days gather and collect physical signatures. He noted that the Commission could also vote to accept e-signatures as well. More research is needed to clarify the potential recommendation to the Commission.

The Town Clerk is the administrative authority to make the decision regarding the “up to 60 days” requirement. The Commission can take steps to solidify a more permanent required timeframe.

Commissioner Klein inquired about how many budget referendums has the Town done? There are none known to have occurred within Town.

Commissioner Bolton requested clarification regarding the 10 to 60 days scheduling timeframe. It was noted that the timeframe has some flexibility to allow sufficient time for the Town when the Town Clerk verifies all signatures.

The Commission consensus determined that the actual date for notice of budget for newspaper publication, get petitions in and verified by the Town Clerk is a shorter period for opponents to collect signatures. The Commission could suggest allowing more time for opponents to gather signatures.

Commissioner Bolton commented that a budget referendum should be automatic. Also, it allows residents to be more engaged in their community. Currently, there is a lack of participation from town residents regarding the overall budget process.

Section 308(b)

Attorney Widem clarified the 15% provision for opposition votes of the total number of voters. The threshold of qualified voters is 2,568, in which the language is not clear.

Commissioner Suggs requested a more simplified version of the 15% provision language in the Town Charter. In addition, the Commission would need to determine a percentage threshold/timing to begin and complete the referendum process.

Attorney Widem noted that the impact of the Town budget is more than just taxes, it is a critical political document that outlines town priorities and future financial outlook. He will review Connecticut general state statutes regarding any limitations and comparative analysis with surrounding towns.

Commissioner Turner reiterated the clarification of 7.5% signatures needed to force a referendum, verification by the Town Clerk and the 15% provision.

Commissioner Klein commented on rearranging the organizational structure of the Town Charter, Section 307-308.

Chairman Suggs mentioned that the minimum threshold is 15% of electors for a valid referendum to be approved.

Commissioner Turner is not opposed to the automatic budget referendum suggestion made by Commissioner Bolton. As an alternative suggestion, determine the budget level increase to a certain threshold, to generate an automatic referendum.

Commissioner Bolton commented that the Town budget does not get approved without a budget referendum.

Chairman Suggs reminded all about the potential additional election cost. He noted that if the public is satisfied with the Council's budget, a referendum would not be required.

Commissioner Klein made further comments regarding Section 307. He also expressed concerns about having anything "automatic" in the Town Charter. He would rather recommend a petition procedure versus automatic.

Chairman Suggs suggested of 3% as a threshold, taking into consideration the public suggestions of a separate referendum for Town and BOE budgets.

Committee Consensus: Establish a threshold below referendum not permitted and above referendum permitted

Section 309 (Emergency appropriation resolution)

Council Charge: Current language – “not to exceed one and one-half percent of the total annual budget of the town for the current fiscal year in any one year”

Discussion

Chairman Suggs asked if the 1.5% is adequate or efficient.

Commissioner Turner inquired about any financial constraints during COVID for this action to be generated. The answer was none.

Commission Consensus: Get more information from the Finance Department regarding emergency appropriations.

Section 310 (Obligatory referendum on bond issues and appropriations)

Discussion

Committee Consensus – Need clarification regarding the 15% provision – electors v. election vote

Chapter 5 – Appointive Officers

Section 501 (Appointments by Council – Town Attorney and Boards/Commissions)

Appointment of Town Attorney

Modify the charter language to reflect more time to conduct prior process to make these appointments. The RFQ – Request for Qualifications timeframe is approximately one month to six weeks, interviews, review time, submission to town council interviews, then appointment.

Commission consensus: Suggested timeframe to initiate a process to expedite selection of town attorney.

Boards/Commissions v. Committee

The current town charter does not have “committees”. Committees can be Ad-Hoc by the Town Council to advise on any town issues. For example, long range planning committee.

Chairman Suggs inquired about the issues with minority representation. There needs to be some clarity and delineation of committees vs. board interest, most residents just want to contribute to their community.

Commissioner Bolton noted that the current language states that the Town Council can appoint Unaffiliates, if you are not enrolled in the majority party.

Commissioner Klein mentioned letting the Town Council decide who should be exempt, a board or commission or special committee of the council.

Attorney Widem will draft language to allow non-partisan groups to be appointed based on interest, committees defined as boards/commissions.

Chairman Suggs discouraged trying to politicize any board or committee by selecting more of political party than the other.

Commissioner Turner inquired about the total number of Town boards and commissions and how they are formed.

Next Meeting – Saturday, July 13, 2024

Topics of Discussion:

- Continued Review of Chapter 3 – The Council, Section 308
- Chapter 5 –Appointive Officers, Section 502 (Town Manager), Section 503 (Town Clerk), Section 504 (Town Treasurer)
- Chapter 6 – Administrative Departments and Officers, Section 604 (Department of Library Services)

APPROVAL OF MINUTES

It was moved by Commissioner Turner, seconded by Commissioner Bolton and voted unanimously to approve the minutes of May 25, 2024.

ADJOURNMENT

It was moved by Commissioner Bolton, seconded by Commissioner Coleman and voted unanimously to adjourn the meeting at 8:40 p.m.