

Harvard Charter Commission  
Public Hearing Minutes  
May 6, 2017  
Town Hall Second Floor Main Conference Room

Members present: Paul Cohen (Chair), Rick Maiore, Sharon McCarthy, George McKenna, Stephanie Opalka, Ron Ostberg, Charles Redinger, Cindy Russo. Members absent: Peter Warren. Others present: approximately 20 town residents.

Paul Cohen called the meeting to order at 9:05 a.m.

### **Overview**

Paul explained that a year ago members of the community felt that there was a need for some change. After the commissioners were elected, they held public hearings, meetings with town boards, and reviewed other towns' charters. As a result of hearing the problems that currently exist, the commission is trying to institute a form of government that installs transparency, accountability, and opportunity.

Paul asked the residents to step back from the details and look at the overarching principles they are trying to implement. The effort is to establish an executive authority in the community that has a vision and the authority to implement that vision in terms of directives to other boards and committees, through the budget process, and with the assistance of town staff.

Paul added that the current structure is too fragmented, which results in a lack of cohesion between the Master Plan and the budget, conflicting jurisdictions, and no accountability when goals are not met.

### **Public Comments**

One resident said he thought it was important to be explicit that the vote a year ago at Town Meeting was to consider the option of having a charter. It was not a directive to have a charter. His concern is that if the commission is advocating a charter and not allowing consideration for not having a charter, that might create resistance to it.

### **Executive Board**

Several residents spoke in support of the executive function in a pyramid structure. One said that currently things are not getting done and there is no accountability. Another added that positions higher on the pyramid could help committees lower on the pyramid.

One person pointed out that many functions report to the selectmen, who spend a lot of their time on small decisions. Several commissioners said that the intent of the executive function is to reduce the time on small decisions to focus more on the town's vision.

### **Education/Communication**

Several residents said that they would like to see what the current structures and procedures look like to be able to compare them to what changes are being recommended. This applies to the charter and to the organization chart. One resident recommended bullet points. "I'm not where you guys are," this resident explained.

One resident asked if the commission could do more to communicate with residents. She suggested that commissioners be out at the transfer station, library, general store, and other town locations to answer questions. She also asked how the charter would insure that town government interacts with citizens and vice versa. She said there needs to be a mechanism other than the local paper, the *Harvard Press*.

Another resident asked for concrete examples of where bylaws are not being followed now.

### **Volunteers**

Two people recommended a volunteer coordinator: One person suggested one at the town level who is paid; the other suggested that each board that has difficulty finding volunteers assign the job to one of its members.

One resident would like to see a limit to the number of committees that a person can serve on at the same time. He said the number would depend on which committees were involved.

Another said that perhaps there are too many committees and some could be combined.

Some boards require more expertise, one resident said, and some are just volunteers and that's what they need. The charter should recognize the two kinds of committees.

### **Elections/Terms**

Two-year vs. Three-year Terms – Two-year terms were considered too short, especially in such a small town where the pool of applicants is small.

Staggered vs. Coterminous Elections – Generally people supported staggered terms especially because of the risk of losing institutionally memory. One resident, however, thought that institutional memory should reside in professionals, not volunteers.

Elected vs. Appointed Committees – One resident strongly supported electing board members, saying that eliminating elected offices would diminish the community importance of volunteers. By having these offices appointed, the town would end up with a selected number of people selecting people that they know. He thought that appointments would be potentially divisive and would decrease diversity on the boards. He also said that once people were elected to boards, they should be held accountable by people higher in the hierarchy.

Another resident was concerned that committees would be populated by friends of the selectmen, or appointed based on their political leanings. Paul responded that as long as boards are held accountable, this risk would be alleviated.

November vs. May Elections – There would be a problem, one resident suggested, if Annual Town meeting were in the spring, but elections did not take place until November. Paul said that votes affecting the operating budget would happen right after ATM. He also said that it is unlikely that the November election suggestion will stand.

### **Term Limits – For Committee Members**

Discussion of term limits brought out differing opinions:

- One resident spoke in favor of limits of three or four terms.
- One resident preferred no term limits.
- Several residents were concerned about finding new members for committees that have trouble getting volunteers.

#### Term Limits – For Committee Chairs

- Several people said that on many committees, not everyone would accept being chair, but those people still contribute to the work of the committee. Others thought that requiring a rotating chair would be good, giving more opportunity to more members, and preventing stagnation of leadership. The suggestion was made to allow a unanimous vote by the committee extend term limits. A resident suggested that these limits be recommendations, not requirements.

#### Other

Planning – One resident suggested that the Community Planning and Development box on the organization chart emphasize planning and not development particularly regarding the decision about integration of Devens.

Permitting – Another resident suggested looking at the Devens model of permitting, which is centralized and more efficient than Harvard's process.

The next meeting is a public hearing Thursday, May 11, at 7 p.m., second floor of Town Hall.

Paul adjourned the meeting at 10:45 a.m.

Laura Andrews, Recorder