

Harvard Charter Commission
Public Hearing Minutes
May 11, 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, Peter Warren. Members absent: Cindy Russo. Others present: four town residents.

Paul Cohen called the meeting to order at 7:07 p.m.

Overview

Paul gave a brief history of the commission. He explained that after the commissioners were elected, they met twice a month, held public hearings and meetings with town boards, and reviewed other towns' charters. He said that the town would have to approve any changes recommended by the commission at Annual Town Meeting.

What the committee has tried to do, Paul said, is create an executive board that would have accountability and transparency. The executive board – the Board of Selectmen renamed the Select Board – would oversee the creation of a vision for the community, plan and create policy, and prepare the budget, and thereby have a means of accountability. One goal would be to take the selectmen out of the minutia of managing the town.

Paul explained that there would be fewer elected and more appointed positions. The appointed boards, like the Planning Board, which would still prepare the Master Plan, would participate in executing the town vision.

The charter would preserve fundamentals that are important to the town, like open town meeting, a volunteer base that sets policy, and a professional staff that supports the volunteers.

State law requires, Paul said, that the commission take the following action:

- Prepare a draft by mid August.
- Prepare a final charter by mid October.
- Send the charter to the state legislature to review for legality and adherence to state law.
- Present the charter at ATM.

During the commissioners introductions, Sharon McCarthy pointed out that the charter has to be reviewed within 10 years and can be altered before the 10-year required review.

Ron Ostberg added that fewer people have the time or inclination to volunteer and the level of expertise on some boards, such as the Board of Health and the Planning Board has increased. Some of the changes recommended in the draft charter are trying to address these changes.

Public Comments

Executive Board

One resident asked if the selectmen now have to look at every new hire. “Yes,” she was told. She recommended that that be changed.

Another person asked when the last time that changes had been made. The commissioners explained that through the years changes have been made through bylaws created when problems needed to be addressed.

One resident asked how questions of responsibility and communication would be addressed by this new executive structure. Paul explained that more centralized authority would make it easier to avoid confusion about decision-making jurisdiction and streamline processes. The selectmen would have oversight and responsibility so concerns would be brought to them.

A resident asked if the commissioners had easily come to consensus. Paul said that they have worked hard to come to consensus. Charles said that they agreed on high-level principles and as discussions of policies became more detailed there were divergent views. George McKenna added that from the beginning they had agreed on the pyramid model with the Select Board at the top carrying out a unified vision of the town.

Volunteers

A resident asked if there had been any analysis done or suppositions by the commissioners as to why volunteerism was declining. Paul said that this is a societal trend that is seen in many civic organizations. This resident said that several sources reported that they had worked hard on committees and nothing happened. Progress was too slow. Charles Redinger said that if civility was a problem, part of the charter addresses that. Sharon added that a volunteer handbook, like the one Westford uses, might help.

Another resident asked if the town actively recruits volunteers. She said that people might be willing to volunteer if they are asked. Sharon told the group about the recommendation from the previous hearing about a volunteer coordinator.

With no further questions, the public hearing ended at 7:40 p.m.

Discussion followed about the role of the Town Administrator and whether the charter adequately detailed the qualifications and responsibilities of that position. The commission agreed to revisit that section of the charter.

Discussion followed about the number of committees that are depicted on the organization chart. George suggested looking at where committees could successfully be grouped, for example the Tree Warden and the Elm Commission within the Conservation Commission. Sharon suggested looking at the org chart in terms of levels of responsibility to simplify the chart. Paul suggested putting this issue on the open issues list, since it may not be a function of the charter.

Rick Maiore proposed writing a comprehensive report to the Select Board to tell them all the issues that should be dealt with either at Town Meeting or within their purview.

Ron said that some document should be setting expectations for implementing the changes. Rick said that Groton had passed a charter and then set up a committee. Stephanie suggested asking the selectmen their ideas of how the charter would be implemented when the commissioners meet with them 5/23.

Discussion followed about how this would happen and how success would be measured. Sharon reviewed the process Groton went through between the 1990s and 2014 when it voted in its charter.

The next meetings currently scheduled for

- May 23 at 7 p.m., at Town Hall with the Board of Selectmen, Finance Committee, and Capital Planning and Investment Committee
- May 25 at 7 p.m. at Town Hall – regular meeting

Paul adjourned the meeting at 8:20 p.m.

Laura Andrews, recorder