

Charter Revision Commission

Public Comments

January 25, 2022

Dear Members of the Charter Commission:

Thank you for your interest in volunteering for the Charter Revision Commission. I especially appreciate those returning from last year's commission to begin a review of the suggested Charter revisions that were presented to the Legislative Council in May, 2021.

I would like to reiterate my support for the Charter Revision suggestions that were made to the Legislative Council in 2021. I support those revisions and hope you will be able to quickly and thoroughly review and make minor changes as you see fit.

My vote is to pursue the Charter Revision process and pass this onto the current Legislative Council for approval before a vote by the general public. Thank you.

Sincerely,

Elaine Dove

Santa Fe Ave

Hamden, CT

With respect to the new Charter Revision Commission, we think that it is imperative to revise the Town Charter. To that end we support the New Commission and use of the May 2021 version as a starting point.

We propose the following additions, changes, etc to the May 2021 version.

1. **Unimpeded access to information.** If we missed this then apologies. If not then we recommend an addition that **ensures** that citizen requests for information cannot be stymied by either delay or threatened charges. Specifically we are thinking of real estate valuations but it might apply to other matters of concern. As a general rule, Town officials should not have the ability to prevent citizens from knowing (within a reasonable time frame) all the details of an issue of concern to them. Even (or perhaps especially) when it paints the Town in a less than good light.
2. **Report of contracts, agreements, etc.** If we missed this then apologies. If not then we recommend a requirement for the Town to maintain an accessible list/issue a periodic public report of all contracts, agreements, etc (above a fixed dollar amount) to include the names of the bidders, the results, where the winning bid fell within the range and specifically whether it was a no-bid award. This should include historic data so the citizens can see whether a disproportionate number of contracts are going to a limited number of concerns and/or whether no-bid contracts are providing value for money.

J Charles and Diana S Wakerley

Blake Circle

Hamden 06517

Dear Charter Committee members,

I am respectfully asking that you reopen consideration of a Town Manager form of government for Hamden. You heard much evidence last year pointing to why the Town Manager model of government was preferable to the Mayoral model Hamden currently has: professionalism, continuity, depoliticization etc.

I hope fresh new people and ideas on the Commission and Council will strongly endorse this change to our city Charter forward.

Respectfully,

Deborah Smith

East Gate Lane,

Hamden, CT 06514

Dear CRC Members,

Thank you for this opportunity to share my thoughts as you prepare to take up the difficult task of finalizing the Charter Commission report submitted to the town on May 25, 2021. I appreciated all of the hard work of the 2020 CRC.

I have the following requests of you:

1. Please keep the creation of a Finance Commission and a Diversity, Equity and Inclusion Commission in the final Charter.

2. Regarding Board and Commission membership: I believe there **should be** a term limit on board and commission service. To address the possibility that there are not residents who wish to fill a seat on any given commission or board, I propose:

A. Members should be allowed to continue to serve if no community members express interest in the open position within 2 months of it being posted.

B. Members should be able to reapply after 1 year has passed since serving on any other board or commission.

The requirement of a term limit was specifically added 10 years ago because the same commission members served for years and years, locking out opportunities for new members with new ideas, perspectives, concerns etc. Power sat in the hands of the few.

3. Please do provide for more professional management and accountability in Hamden by re-examining and modifying the Chief Operating Officer or Chief of Staff position to meet the needs of a professionally run administration.

As called for previously, this position should be written "to avoid any of the issues raised by the Town Attorney and Fire Chief pertaining to MERA.

I also support the 3 additional accountability tools listed in the report, regardless of the length of the mayor's term.

4. Regarding Public Safety –I support expanding membership of the police commission to 9 members and include a member from every district. This would provide every district with a commissioner and a council representative who should be on top of important public safety issues.

I support the Charter language that permits the police commission to function as a civilian review board with the authority to issue subpoenas if so designated by the legislative council with the support of the community. - section 7-2. D

I also support diversification of qualifications for board members including transportation expertise, social worker knowledge and skills and knowledgeable community activists.

I believe periodic training should be required to guarantee adherence to best practices. This should include training in basic traffic engineering to better equip members to make decisions based on knowledge of best practices for traffic policies.

5. Lastly, regarding accessibility & participation- To ensure transparency and accountability, it is very important that as many opportunities for public comment as possible, are enshrined in the Charter. I support all of the recommendations made by Hamden resident, Sarah Clark.

I have confidence that working together in the best interest of our town, you are going to provide Hamden with an excellent Charter that will serve us well going forward.

Thank you for your willingness to serve our town on this important Commission, which is central to protecting our democracy on a local level.

Sincerely,

Diane Hoffman

Wilmot Rd.

Dear Charter Review Commission:

Thank you for stepping up to continue this important work for the Town of Hamden.

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2. Regarding Board and Commission membership: I believe there should be a term limit on board and commission service. To address the possibility that there are not residents who wish to fill a seat on any given commission or board, I propose:
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As called for previously, this position should be written "to avoid any of the issues raised by the Town Attorney and Fire Chief pertaining to MERA."

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I also support diversification of qualifications for board members including transportation expertise, social worker knowledge and skills and knowledgeable community activists. I support periodic training, as needed, to guarantee adherence to best practices.

I would like to see as many opportunities for public comment as possible be enshrined in the charter.

Thank you all for your hard work on behalf of Hamden.

Judy Lhamon

King Street

Dear Members of Hamden's 2022 Charter Revision Commission,

First, I want to thank you for agreeing to serve on the 2022 Charter Revision Commission. The issues are complex, the hours will be long, and the decisions you'll be making are critical. I'm grateful for your dedication to the Town in committing to such an important project.

Second, I am writing to applaud many of the changes that last year's Commission incorporated in the May 25, 2021, version of the Charter. I urge you to **retain in particular the general concepts of** (if not every detail of – I'm sure you will be reviewing the details as the months go on):

Creation of a Finance Committee

Creation of a Diversity, Equality, and Inclusion Committee

Expansion of the Police Commission to include representatives from every Legislative Council District

A major restructure of the budget process and creation of a Capital Projects budget

Third, I hope you will consider **revising** certain sections of the May 25, 2021, Charter. Here are my thoughts:

Boards and Commissions: Public input. (Section 7:1:B:7:b)

The 2021 Proposed Charter emphasizes multiple times that Boards and Commissions should represent the people of Hamden and "serve as a conduit for citizens' concerns." This is consistent with the goals of a democratic form of government that supports accessibility, accountability, and transparency.

For these reasons, I strongly recommend that you **increase the number of opportunities for citizens to offer public input** during all meetings of Boards and Commissions* as follows:

- a) Public Input at the beginning of a meeting on any item within the purview of the commission
- b) **Public Input during the meeting when individual agenda items are being discussed, including "Action Items";**
- c) Public comment at the end of a meeting, to give citizens an opportunity to follow up on issues and questions raised during the meeting or to simply share information relevant to the commission.

The **May 25, 2021**, Proposed Charter currently includes (a) and (c), and I urge you to retain those items. I also strongly recommend that you ADD (b) to support fruitful exchanges of information on an agenda item that might not have been accomplished by (a) alone.

I know from first-hand experience how frustrating it can be for citizens to sit in a meeting and listen to board members discuss a situation with incomplete information — the need for which was not apparent before the meeting, when public input had already been allowed and given. As discussion of agenda items proceeds, the citizen knows that s/he can easily offer new information, but is unable to do so because the “beginning of the meeting” public input session (a) has already passed.

By allowing public input WHILE agenda items are being discussed (presumably in a manner defined by the Commission: 2 minutes per person, e.g.), Commissioners can ensure that their decisions are based on “thorough research and (a) review of all alternatives on an issue prior to making a recommendation” (7:1:A:(2), as the Charter requires.

Other CT communities allow all three of this public-input options. See Westport’s Board of Education and Berlin offer useful examples.

*(Qualification: I understand that there are certain meetings covered by State regulations that determine whether and how public input is allowed. The suggestions I’ve made above are excluded from those types of meetings.)

Boards and Commissions: Public Input (7:1:B:7:b)

With respect, I’d like to suggest that all references to the format in which citizens can participate in their government via public comment revised to say “written AND/OR spoken comments” to ensure that comments are not limited to written only. Several times last year, two commissions allowed citizens to “speak” only through written submissions. This kind of requirement can limit participation since some people can be reluctant to, or have limited time to, prepare written documents.

Boards and Commissions: Public Input (7:1:B:7:b)

I would also like to see a requirement that the meetings of all boards and commissions continue to be conducted via a hybrid option indefinitely (or via a “Zoom-equivalent hybrid arrangement”). During the last two years, we have learned how public participation can be facilitated via Zoom, and how the business of government can continue on successfully even in the face of bad weather, schedule conflicts, etc., etc. Keeping meetings open and accessible in multiple formats via a “hybrid” system benefits everyone.

In addition, and as important, Zoom's recordings have supported the concepts of access and accountability as well, since citizens can return to recordings days, months, or years after a meeting to learn what was said.

Boards and Commissions: Public input (7:1:B:7:a).

I support a suggestion that I believe was made by Diane Hoffman last year that all Boards and Commissions be required to acknowledge receipt of a citizen’s Public Comment statement so the sender knows their message has been received. This ensures confidence in the Public Input process.

Boards and Commissions

I strongly recommend that new Charter specifically require all boards and commissions comply with all Freedom of Information (**FOI**) stipulations regarding posting of agendas and minutes (in addition to all other FOI regulations). I know that FOI compliance is an understood component of town meetings. But I hope that explicitly noting it in the Charter will give this expectation more prominence and allow for much more accountability and compliance than is currently the case.

I also respectfully request that the **agendas of all boards and commissions be required to include links to all back-up materials** related to agenda items (like the Legislative Council does now). Together with the FOI change noted above, this item will ensure that the public is given ample opportunity to see what will be discussed at meetings, which in turn gives citizens ample time to prepare for public input. These changes will also ensure that meetings of boards and commissions are run professionally and efficiently and that the meetings are transparent and productive.

Boards and Commissions: Public input

Please ensure that the stipulations and opportunities regarding public input outlined in Section VII (Boards and Commissions) are ALSO included in Section IV (Legislative Council) and Section VII (Police Commission/Traffic Authority), both of which also allow public input.

Public Safety

A note in one of the reports from last year's Charter Commission says the Commission "acknowledges the Police Commission's dual role as Transportation Authority as required by State law." As I understand it, this means that those who serve on the Police Commission must also serve concurrently as members of the Traffic Authority.

I hope this can change. The issues addressed by these two bodies are much different, presumably requiring (or at least benefitting from) commission members who have different backgrounds and experience. In addition, traffic-related issues have increased significantly in the last few years, resulting in a large work load. For these reasons, it seems to me that separating the Police Commission from the Traffic Authority would make sense.

I understand that separating the two is not possible right now. But perhaps the Charter can recommend that the Town make every effort to encourage the appropriate officials at local and state levels to separate the two and, when possible, for a separate Traffic Commission to be created.

In the interim, please consider requiring that at least 2 or 3, of the proposed 9 members of the Police Commission have experience in, or knowledge of, traffic safety issues, systems, policies, etc. This will help add professional depth to our town, as so many citizens requested when Charter discussions were underway last year.

I also endorse a suggestion made last spring by Phil Cronan and Diane Hoffman that members of the Police Commission/Traffic Authority "take a basic Traffic Engineering Course so they will have the ability to better evaluate requests/proposals, ask meaningful questions, and make decisions based in knowledge of best practices for traffic policies."

Chief Operating Office

I appreciate the reasons this position was created. But I don't understand how the job responsibilities as outlined in the proposed Charter are much different from the responsibilities of the Mayor. I would appreciate more discussion and information about the goals and duties of the position in the coming months.

Town Manager

In its Introduction to the May 25, 2021, Transmittal Letter for the 2021 Charter, the Commission notes that it was unable to consider transforming Hamden's mayoral form of government to a town manager system because this "wholesale change...would (have) require(d) more time and much more extensive community interaction than a Charter Revision Commission can conduct in less than a year." It added, "In the future, this is a matter that takes months and, sometime(s), years of analysis where(as) a charter revision is at the end of the process."

The Transmittal Letter notes that there were "numerous calls for a Town Manager form of government." On the chance that such requests persist in the coming years, I strongly recommend that the 2022 Charter include the *option* of exploring the change to a Town Manager system by adding a section calling for the Legislative Council to explore this question beginning several years before the 2022 Charter expires, perhaps in 2028 or 2029. This would give the next generation of Hamden's leaders the time needed for such an exploration, rather than leaving it up to the next Charter Revision Commission (which, as our 2021 CRC noted, is not the correct place for such an exploration to begin with).

Many thanks for considering these suggestions, which I submit with admiration and gratitude for your willingness to take on the task of seeing a new Charter to completion.

Sincerely,

Sarah Clark, Haverford Street