

**MINUTES
TOWN OF GROTON
CHARTER REVISION COMMISSION
PUBLIC HEARING**

JULY 30, 2007

TOWN HALL ANNEX – COMMUNITY ROOM 1

1. Members Present: Chairman Mick O’Beirne, Secretary Shirley Dunbar-Rose, Members Robert Frink, Nancy Moffat, Richard Moravsik, Raymond Munn, Ed Stebbins, and John Wirzbicki. Absent: Stan Dziurzinski.

Also Present: Office Assistant Elga Concepcion

2. Chairman O’Beirne called the Public Hearing to order at 7:00 p.m.

3. CALL OF THE MEETING

The Notice of Public Hearing pursuant to Connecticut General Statutes Sec. 7-191 was read by Chairman O’Beirne.

4. The Chairman recognized his receipt of communications from Ed Ettinger and Margaret Smith expressing their suggestions for the Town Charter.

5. CITIZEN COMMENTS

Sidney Van Zandt, 3 Front Street, Noank, emphasized that water needs to be first and foremost in all decisions made with respect to the Town. She requested that major developments and zone changes be brought to the Town Council for review. Ms. Van Zandt discussed the review process of development plans in detail. She reiterated that water be of the highest priority with the Planning Department, Economic Development Committee, and Southeastern Connecticut Council of Governments. Ms. Van Zandt forwarded a presentation from the Department of Health to the Chairman.

Jim Streeter, 64 Pleasant Street, a Town Councilor, thanked all the members for volunteering their time and those in the audience who were not selected to serve on the Charter Revision Commission. He asked the Commission to do what is best for the community as a whole. Mr. Streeter suggested that no consideration be given to discontinuing the Representative Town Meeting (RTM). He stated that a budget referendum would be an impractical and unnecessary process which could result in chaos in the Town’s budgetary process. Mr. Streeter believes that any recommendations by the Charter Revision Commission to either eliminate the RTM or have a budget referendum will result in the Charter’s entire revision package being voted down.

Sue Sutherland, 32 Neptune Drive, provided a list of suggestions for a revised Town Charter. Her suggestions include the drafting of the text, publication/notification of agendas, meetings, public hearings, and meeting minutes. Ms. Sutherland expressed her concern for the speaking time allotted to developers, Town staff and residents at hearings. She noted the lack of detailed and timely responses from Town staff with respect to expensive consultant studies performed for the Town. Ms. Sutherland suggested that two alternatives be presented for the Charter.

John Sutherland, 32 Neptune Drive, thanked the members for volunteering their time to revise the Charter. He summarized his recommendations on the following Charter chapters: Incorporation and Powers (I), Representative Town Meeting (III), Appointive Officers-Boards and Commissions (V), Finance and Taxation (VIII), and the Merit System (IX).

Ed Ettinger, 174 Cedar Road, stated that the Charter needed to be radically changed and that the Town Councilors should be compensated for their work and their term of service limited to two four year terms maximum in order to prevent the Town from taking on a persona of its Council instead of its citizens. He noted the definition of terms in other town charters. Mr. Ettinger believes that a large percentage of electors who are independent of either political party are not given equal rights to be considered for Boards and Commissions. He proposed that every nonresident owner of a property assessed at \$50,000 or more be granted the right to become an elector in local elections and referendums. Mr. Ettinger reviewed other changes he would like to see in the current Town Charter.

Archie Swindell, 192 Monument Street, a member of the Board of Education (BOE), noted his service on two prior Charter Revision Commissions. He stated that a budget referendum is one of the key issues which has kept prior Charter revisions from passing. Mr. Swindell asked Commissioners to keep an open mind and to do what is best for the entire Town. If the requirements for the referendum and petition are too strict, citizens will vote down any necessary and sensible changes made to the Charter. He suggested that the Commission construct budget referendum criteria around a scenario in which elected officials have misread the public's intent and wishes. Mr. Swindell stated that it is hazardous for a budget referendum to pass easily so it becomes routine, making the RTM's role meaningless. He urged the Commission to not take away the RTM and to seek legal advice on the present Charter.

Jack Sebastian, 4 East Shore Avenue, RTM member for District 8, stated that under certain conditions taxpayers must be permitted to vote on the annual operating budget of the Town. He does not believe that the RTM is representative of the majority of taxpayers and that it tends to be a "rubber stamp". He recounted his first night at a RTM budget review session, noting the lack of debate and long intermission of extensive eating. He suggested that whenever the Town and BOE budgets exceed the rate of inflation, the budget should be voted on by all the Town's voters.

Mariellen French, 12 Little Gull Lane, Mystic, would like the Commission to consider having a referendum on the budget. She stated that there needs to be another way of publicizing this type of public hearing, other than via the newspaper. Ms. French suggested that the Town create an ethics committee.

Genevieve Cerf, 17 Crescent Street, RTM member for District 8, stated that there is not sufficient oversight and guidance on the part of the Town Council in development projects. Ms. Cerf expressed her concerns over Councilor O'Beirne's comments at the Town Council meeting of July 17 regarding the mixed use zoning project. She feels that the Town Manager is biased and in favor of development at any cost. Ms. Cerf stated that there is not a body or process which looks at development as a whole, weighing the pros and cons of all aspects. She agrees with some of Mr. Sebastian's comments regarding the RTM and would like to see some sort of referendum process.

Responding to Ms. Cerf's comments regarding mixed use zoning, Chairman O'Beirne clarified that it is not illegal for the Town Council to speak with the land use commissions regarding general policy.

Kevin Trejo, 536 Shennecossett Road, RTM member for District 2, stated that he does not look for the Commission to make drastic changes. He asked the Commission to look at voting districts which are "loaded" and have the ability to swing votes. Mr. Trejo reported that he enjoys serving on the RTM.

Chairman O'Beirne and Commissioner Munn reiterated that citizens are welcome to speak and submit communications at the monthly Charter Revision Commission meetings held on the second and fourth Mondays of each month.

5. ADJOURNMENT

The Chairman adjourned the meeting at 8:10 p.m.

Shirley Dunbar-Rose

Secretary

Approved: August 13, 2007.