

TOWN OF GROTON
 CHARTER REVISION COMMISSION
 REGULAR MEETING MINUTES
 February 13, 2017
 TOWN HALL ANNEX—COMMUNITY ROOM 2

Chair Pro Tem Aument called the meeting to order at 6:32 p.m.

I. ROLL CALL

Members Present: Chair Hauber, Commissioners Scott Aument, Kathy Chase, Jane Dauphinais, Robert Frink, Patrice Granatsoky, Rosanne Kotowski, Daniel Mello, and Jennifer L. White

Absent: Commissioners Brandon Marley and Darcy Peruzzotti

II. APPROVAL OF MINUTES

A motion was made by Commissioner Chase, seconded by Commissioner Frink, to approve the minutes of the January 23, 2017 meeting.

Vote: 8-0-1 Chair Pro Tem Aument abstained.

III. CITIZENS' PETITIONS

Fred Kent, 120 Warren Avenue, Mystic, stated that the Town is facing a thirteen million dollar cut in State aid to the education budget, reductions in pension funding from the State, further education adjustments based on the Superior Court judgement, millions of dollars of new spending for the 2020 school building program, and the grand list is declining. He stated that if these factors are not dealt with properly, there would be a spiral of ever increasing tax increases. He noted that the Town has overspent for years, and nobody in Town government has had the courage to deal with fiscal realities. He stated that every taxpayer should have the opportunity to approve every budget/mill rate increase that exceeds the cost of living.

John Wirzbicki, 355 Brook, Noank, stated that he is opposed to abolishing the RTM and creating a Board of Finance and a referendum process similar to Stonington's. He noted that the Commission's job is to determine what is best for the Town of Groton. He stated that the Board of Finance/referendum process is a bad idea. He stated that those who advocate for this change are not interested in what is right for Groton; they are interested in keeping their taxes down. He stated that the education budget would be targeted first. He referenced the Town of Stonington's referendum process and noted that after years of referendums and budget reductions, its schools are mediocre at best. He stated that nine percent of registered voters in Stonington voted in its last referendum, and voters are motivated by their desire to slash services they do not personally need. He noted that the timing of referendum with respect to families and vacations makes it difficult for turnout from that segment of the population. He stated that the system is biased in cuts at every stage. He noted that a Board of Finance/referendum process would be less democratic than a RTM form of government. He stated that there is no way to be sure that a Board of Finance would be representative of the entire Town. He stated that the RTM contains members from

every part of town and is more representative and democratic than a Board of Finance. He stated that he is grateful for the education his children received in Groton. He stated that there should be a governmental system that provides the education and services that people need.

Peter Roper, 210 Pequot Avenue, Mystic, stated that he is proud of Groton. He stated that there is an opportunity to participate in Groton government on Boards and Commissions, RTM, and the Council. He stated that he does not think a Board of Finance is the way to go. He noted that he supports the Council/RTM form of government.

Juliette Parker, 520F Shennecossett Road, Groton, stated that she is a member of the RTM. She noted that her fear with a Board of Finance is that it would not represent the whole Town. She stated that sending a budget to referendum each time would not be cost efficient, and voters would not get out and vote at each referendum.

Town Councilor Bonnie Nault, 41 Pearl Street, Mystic, stated that she supports eliminating the RTM in favor of a Board of Finance. She stated that a qualified Board of Finance could counsel the Town Council on the budget and other issues.

IV. COMMUNICATIONS

- a. Chair Hauber: None.
- b. Secretary: None.
- c. Members.

Commissioner Kotowski stated that she attended a recent Town Council meeting where Mayor Flax stated that he would like a zero-percent tax increase. She stated that the Town and Board of Education are ignoring the budget direction they received from the Town Council because they are requesting increases.

Commissioner Mello distributed and reviewed the Budget Calendar for the Town of Haddam, Connecticut.

Commissioner Granatosky confirmed that everybody had received correspondence from Gary Welles and Kathy Neugent.

Commissioner Frink stated that he met with a member of the Stonington Board of Finance.

Commissioner Dauphinais stated that she spoke with a number of Town Councilors about the changes the Commission is contemplating.

V. NEW BUSINESS

Commissioner Mello made a motion, seconded by Commissioner Frink, to adopt as a recommendation of the Groton Charter Revision Commission report to the Town Council that the Charter of the Town of Groton be revised to incorporate a Board of Finance as an elected

body of the Town of Groton and the elimination of the RTM upon approval of the revised Charter.

Commissioner Granatosky referenced the research she completed on the RTM; it is included in the record. She stated that in 1955 the Report of Town Government Study Committee was written by a group of citizens known as the Committee of Nineteen. They determined that the Board of Finance/Selectmen/Town Meeting form of government was not appropriate because the Town was growing. She noted that the Committee questioned if a RTM/Town Council form of government would better serve the population of Groton. She noted that in 1955, it was documented that the Town's administration will become more time consuming and complex as the Town continues to grow, and it will need the full-time service of technically trained personnel for the management of its affairs. She referenced a League of Women Voters document from 1964 that states that the RTM form of government provides a check and balance function on the budget. She referenced the preface of a League of Women Voters publication from 1973 that referenced the abolition of the RTM as a discussion topic. She stated that the RTM was not intended to be temporary. She stated that Groton has made great progress, and she does not want to see it regress. She referenced a newspaper article referencing Stonington creating a fleet fund, and she noted that Groton has had a fleet fund for decades. She stated that there is plenty of opportunity to get involved in the Town of Groton, and the people elected can be changed without changing the form of government.

Commissioner Mello stated that an elected Board of Finance could be representative of areas of the Town. He stated that an elected Board of Finance that has six-year terms would require people to be dedicated. He noted that if RTM members are not attending RTM meetings, then that is inefficient, and he is looking at efficiency in government. He stated that most towns in Connecticut have moved towards a Board of Finance.

Commissioner White stated that a Board of Finance would work in conjunction with the Town Manager, and the intent is to not eliminate Town staff. She stated that as the Town grows, it should become more efficient. She stated that having a group of forty-five people approving a budget may not be appropriate. She stated that we may need people who are knowledgeable in finance look at the revenue side of the budget. She noted that some expenditure is good to improve the Town, but we need to make sure that Groton is a viable town as people move into this part of Connecticut.

Commissioner Kotowski stated it does not matter if the RTM was meant to be temporary; the best form of government for Groton should be weighed in the Commission's decision. She noted that a Board of Finance would be elected by district.

Commissioner Frink stated that the Board of Finance would be a resource to the Town Council, and there are six other towns in Connecticut that have a Town Council/Town Manager/Board of Finance form of government. He stated that a Board of Finance is a tried and true form of government. He stated that a Board of Finance would include a different budget process that would be more proactive on the front end of the budget's development. He stated that he is looking ahead to a proactive, elected government with a Board of Finance/Town Manager/Town Council form of government.

Commissioner Dauphinais stated that the Councilors she spoke with were receptive to a Board of Finance that analyzes the budget. She noted that she is determined that this not replace the Town Manager and the professional staff. She stated that she thinks it will work in Groton and she will support it.

Commissioner Chase stated that the RTM is too large, and a smaller Board of Finance with a six year term is great.

Chair Pro Tem Aument stated that he supports eliminating the RTM. He stated that he supports a Board of Finance as an oversight elected by the voters with the interests of the voters and the Town Council in mind. He noted the Town Council needs help. He stated that a six-year term keeps stability. He noted that a Board of Finance would be more fiscally efficient; the fiscal climate is changing. He stated that having the RTM at the end of the budget process is doing things the wrong way, and the Board of Finance is involved in the process more year round.

Commissioner Granatosky stated that the idea of a Town Meeting is that everyone who is entitled to vote shows up to vote; a referendum functions the same way. She noted that people in 1955 had the foresight to plan for professional staff to move Groton in a good direction. She stated that it would be a mistake to take us backwards.

Commissioner Frink moved the question.

Vote: 8-1 (Commissioner Granatosky)-0

Vote on the motion:

7-2(Chair Hauber and Commissioner Granatosky)-0

Commissioner Dauphinais acknowledged the decades of labor intensive effort of the members of the RTM. She noted that they deserve a big thank you.

Commissioner Frink stated that he agrees with Commissioner Dauphinais. He noted that he would like to be careful of language, and the term "get rid of" is not a nice term to use. He noted that the Commission is making recommendations.

Commissioner Granatosky noted that these are recommendations and they need to go to the voters of the Town.

Commissioner Frink reviewed possible recommendations for a budget referendum in addition to a triggered referendum. He stated that the Town Council could send the budget to referendum at its discretion, or citizens could petition to send the budget to referendum. He noted that he is fond of a triggered referendum because if the budget exceeds a spending limit, then it has to be taken to the voters with good reasons. He noted Stonington's school budget referendum passed with a 2.8 percent increase.

Commissioner Mello stated that the budget could go to a Town Meeting.

Chair Pro Tem Aument stated that he likes the idea of a Town Meeting because it could give non-resident taxpayers the chance to vote on financial matters.

Commissioner Kotowski questioned if a 2.5 percent tax increase is sustainable every year. She stated that she supports a referendum every year, and the majority of the people she has spoken with support a budget referendum.

Commissioner Dauphinais stated that she is opposed to the idea of a referendum in a Town of Groton's size and complexity. She stated that the fleet reserve fund and a complex sewer treatment plant system do not generate public passion and support, yet they are crucial. She stated that "no" voters in a referendum are not held accountable for their vote. She stated that Groton is too fragmented of a Town, and it is the job of the Council and elected officials to think of it as a whole. She stated that if the budget fails, it goes back to the people who did not know what to cut in the first place.

Commissioner Kotowski stated that the voters of Groton get it. She noted the recent \$184,500,000 school project passed along with seven of the last referendums. She noted that she does not see where the voters of this Town do not get it.

Commissioner Granatosky reviewed a number of Towns that had referendums and the dollar differences between the original proposed budgets and the approved budgets. She noted that it will cost more to run one election than the differences in the budgets from the proposed to the approved. She stated that she is worried about people paying attention. She stated that the highest number of unique budget-related hits on the Town's website in one month 48. She noted that she is concerned that there will be a small faction that will rile everybody up and those people will show up to vote and everyone else is not paying attention. She stated that there was a PAC that was formed for the recent school referendum, and she questioned if you want special interests to form PACs every year; the Town should not be held hostage.

Commissioner Mello stated that a lot of people in Groton know the ECS money has been reduced by thirteen million dollars, and this may force Groton to look at consolidation. He noted that people want a say in what is going to happen, and they should have a vote.

Commissioner White stated that she does not believe in a referendum because of its cost. She stated that better marketing and advertising makes certain things pass at referendum. She stated that we need to trust that elected people are representing and doing what is in the Town's best interest.

Commissioner Chase stated that a lot of people do not know how to get involved. She stated that if there was a referendum, people would do the research about what is going on.

Chair Pro Tem Aument stated that self-government is unique and makes America great. He noted that checks and balances and efficiencies are needed, and that could be accomplished by a budget referendum. He stated that what is going on with the State is concerning and is a reason to change the process with the times. He noted that heard that Groton was targeted because it is fiscally sound, and it keeps a relatively high percentage in its fund balance. He stated that the process should be changed to get people into the system so they can have a vote.

Commissioner Granatosky stated that Groton was targeted because there was a change in the ECS formulation from free-reduced lunch to HUSKY, and there is a large population of Navy kids who use Husky because they use TRICARE.

Commissioner Frink stated that a budget referendum by petition with a minimum voter turnout requirement could be a possibility. He noted a petition could be to add or reduce money from the budget. He stated that citizens are put back in the process if they want to do the work, which is not easy, but the process is there.

Commissioner Kotowski stated that she would be in favor of it if it was easy.

In response to Chair Pro Tem Aument, Commissioner Frink stated that the last Charter Revision Commission had minority opinions.

Commissioner Granatosky stated that if the Committee's recommendation passes, it has stripped away the voice of the people. She noted that she agrees with Commissioner Kotowski in that if the RTM goes away, you need to have a referendum to keep the voice of the people.

Chair Pro Tem Aument stated there could be a Council elected by district.

Commissioner Chase stated that the Board of Finance could have one person per district.

Commissioner Kotowski stated that she supported having a Board of Finance that would focus on revenue and would scrutinize the budget and a budget referendum that allows citizens to participate. She stated that she could compromise to have a referendum with a trigger, and she questioned in a 2.5 percent increase is sustainable.

Commissioner Mello stated that there could be a Town Meeting.

Chair Hauber stated that the Board of Education budget presentation does not show what the people should see. She noted that people who look at it would say the Town's budget should be cut and not the Board of Education's budget.

Commissioner Chase noted that the Board of Education's budget presentation showed that the budget was basically kept level except for salaries and fringe.

Commissioner Dauphinais stated that if there was a budget referendum there are many variables to consider. She stated that the voter turnout requirement is the most important variable for her because she would not want one interest group to be turning out at the polls in a year when nobody else cared. She noted that the school capital plan referendum passed with monumental effort. She stated that the budget should not be reduced to politics. She stated that she supports a 25 percent voter turnout requirement. She noted that if there was a budget referendum, the questions should be divided into Town budget and Board of Education budget. She noted that she also supports questions that are advisory, and a budget referendum needs to be instructive for the Board of Finance/Town Council.

Commissioner Frink stated that voter turnout was 28 percent in the last municipal election in November, 2015; 27 percent in 2013; and 22 percent in 2011.

Chair Pro Tem Aument stated that he thinks a 20-25 percent voter turnout requirement may be doable. He noted that instructive votes give a lot of information, and the referendum costs a substantial amount of money, but what the Town gets out of it outweighs the cost.

Commissioner White questioned what the referendum process/details would be.

Commissioner Granatosky made a motion, seconded by Chair Hauber, to remove the proposed accountability language off the table.

Commissioner Frink stated that the Commission should look at Chapter Nine.

In response to Commissioner Dauphinais, Commissioner Frink stated that his intent is to give more intense citizen input on the budget on the front end through budget workshops. He noted that his concern is that there are nine Town Councilors who were just elected setting goals. He stated that the municipal election process for the Town is not a substitute for strategic planning. In response to Commissioner Mello, he stated that the Board of Finance would provide financial input. He clarified that the Board of Finance would communicate roles and responsibilities of the budget process and status of the current budget including a five year cost/revenue/risk projection. Then the budget is given to the Town Council along with citizen and department head input, and then it is given to the Town Manager. He noted that the policy making body is the Town Council.

Commissioner Mello stated that short-term goals would deal with the immediacy of the budget, and long-term goals can be projected through strategic planning.

Commissioner Dauphinais stated that examples of short-term goals are establishing public restrooms in Mystic and solving the trash conundrum that Groton had. She stated that the Council should be making goals for itself and the Town Manager.

Commissioner Kotowski stated that goals should be of the sitting Council.

Commissioner White stated that there should be a long-term strategic view of Groton.

Commissioner Granatosky stated that if people are getting elected, they should be out talking with people, and by the time voting happens, it is established what that group of people wants; they should be working on their own goals.

In response to Commissioner Mello, Commissioner Frink stated that the Town Council is the resource allocators.

Commissioner Dauphinais stated that Managers need to hear a vote from the Town Council on budgetary guidance.

The Commissioners discussed what should be included in the Charter verses Town Council rules.

Commissioner Mello moved the question, seconded by Commissioner Granatosky.
Passed unanimously

Motion on proposed goal setting and budget guidance by Commissioner Dauphinais.
Passed unanimously

The Commissioners discussed items for the next agenda. Chair Pro Tem Aument announced the following topics for the next meeting:

- Chapter Nine-Commissioner Frink
- Discussion of definition of elector(s) as non-resident property owners and vote on it-Commissioner Kotowski
- Consolidation of Boards and Commissions-Commissioner White

The Commissioners discussed adding meetings to the Charter Revision Commission. Commissioner Frink stated that he would draft a schedule for the next meeting.

VI. ADJOURNMENT

A motion to adjourn was made by Chair Hauber, seconded by Commissioner Granatosky.

Chair Pro Tem Aument adjourned the meeting at 8:27 p.m.

Attest:

Scott Aument Secretary