

TOWN OF GROTON
CHARTER REVISION COMMISSION
REGULAR MEETING MINUTES
DECEMBER 05, 2016
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 Dee Hauber, Chair Pro Tem Scott Aument, Commissioners Kathy Chase, Jane Dauphinais (via phone), Robert Frink, Patrice Granatsoky, Rosanne Kotowski, Brandon Marley, and Jennifer L. White
Absent: Commissioners Mello and Peruzzotti

II. APPROVAL OF MINUTES

A motion was made by made by Commissioner Granatosky, seconded by Chair Hauber, to approve the minutes of the November 21, 2016 meeting.
The motion carried unanimously.

Commissioner Mello arrived at 6:34 p.m.

III. CITIZENS' PETITIONS:

Keith Hedrick, 156 Shennecossett Parkway, Groton, thanked the Commissioners for their service. He stated that the he is against the referendum, and he is concerned voters are not always as knowledgeable on subjects as the Council or RTM. He stated that there could be manipulation of voters who could block a referendum. He noted that the estimated cost of a referendum is 25 thousand dollars, and it recently took Stonington three times to pass its referendum. He questioned what the feedback loop would be if the referendum was voted down. He stated that he agrees with the list of multiple offices proposed by Commissioner Frink. He stated that the Commission should focus on what form of government Groton should have. He reviewed sections 5.3, 5.7, 7.3, and 7.1.2 and noted that there are things that would undermine the Town Manager and would weaken him. He stated that the Town Manger runs the daily operations of the town, and if the department heads get mixed messages from the Town Council, then there would be questions as to who the department heads work for. He noted that if the Commission decides to make a change to one section, it may affect other sections of the Town Charter. He stated that if the Commission wants to get rid of the Town Manager, then it should write the Town Manager out of the Charter, but the Town Manager is the consistency when there are regime changes. He emphasized that the decisions the Commission makes should be consistent with the entire Charter.

Leanne Ouimette, 72 Prospect Hill, New Hampshire, stated that she is a non-resident property owner. She noted that non-resident property owners have no say in tax decisions for the Town. She noted that she would like to have a say in Groton's taxes. She noted that she does not want to be the victim of having taxes raised without representation.

In response to Ms. Ouimette's question, Chair Pro Tem Aument clarified that non-resident owners do not get to vote on anything. He encouraged Ms. Ouimette to continue to communicate with the Commissioners, and he thanked Ms. Ouimette for her concerns.

IV. COMMUNICATIONS

a. Chair Pro Tem Aument acknowledged the letter received from Bo McBee. He stated that he has information from the Board of Finance Chair for the Town of Bozrah.

b. Commissioner Frink stated that he had follow-up telephone conversations with the Chairs of the Board of Finance in Glastonbury and Darien, and a telephone conversation with RTM Moderator Newsome.

c. Commissioner Dauphinais stated that she received communication from Scott Shanley, the current Town Manager Manchester, Connecticut.

V. NEW BUSINESS

a. Review Section 3.5.2 of the Current Town Charter
Commissioner Frink made a motion, seconded by Commissioner Mello, to table agenda item 3.5.2 to another meeting.

In response to Commissioner Granatosky, Chair Pro Tem Aument stated that the Commission wants to get to the issue of government structure, the RTM and Board of Finance, first.

Vote: 9-0-1 Commissioner Marley abstains.

b. Review Sections 5.3, 5.7, 7.3, and 7.1.2 of the Current Town Charter
Commissioner Kotowski stated that she had a conversation with a former Mayor, and the items she identified last meeting were suggestions that could help make the government more efficient. She noted that some suggestions may be more appropriate for Town Council rules, and the Commission could determine if it wants to place the items in the parking lot or move forward with them.

In response to Commissioner Kotowski, Chair Pro Tem Aument stated that the Commission is looking at the big issues first.

Chair Hauber made a motion, seconded by Commissioner Chas, to table items 5.3, 5.7, 7.3, and 7.1.2 to another meeting.

Vote: 8 In Favor; 1 Opposed (Kotowski); 1 Abstains (Marley)

c. Government Structure

1. RTM

Commissioner Frink distributed and reviewed the Town Council/Board of Finance form of Government discussion paper. This document has been received for record and is included in the minutes. He gave a brief overview of his thoughts on the duties,

benefits, and problems solved with a Town Council/Board of Finance form of government. Commissioner Frink distributed a document entitled Board of Finance List of Potential Duties, and it is included in the minutes for this meeting. He highlighted that the Town Council/Board of Finance form of Government promotes citizen input on the budget.

Commissioner Mello stated that Commissioner Frink's outline gives citizens input on the budget process through an elected Board of Finance. He stated that a point of clarification would be defining the relationship between the Town Council, the Board of Finance, and the Town Manager. He stated the Board of Finance should deal with the preparation of the budget. He noted that Groton's website is not welcoming. He stated that a six-member Board of Finance would give citizens representation, and it would not be as difficult to find people to serve on it as it is to find people to serve on the RTM.

Commissioner Kotowski stated that a Board of Finance would serve Groton well- especially if it deals with revenue. She stated that a Board of Finance with a referendum would be the best solution, and she would not support eliminating the RTM without a referendum; she believes that is what the voters want as well.

Commissioner Frink stated that he agrees with Commissioner Kotowski.

Commissioner White stated that she may be in favor of a referendum if there was more information on it, but she is concerned about its cost. She questioned when a referendum would come into play when there are elected officials and a budget that is prepared and managed effectively.

Commissioner Kotowski stated that because of the 7.8% tax increases of the past two years, there needs to be something that starts controlling revenue, and the combination of a referendum and a Finance Board would promote accountability.

Commissioner Granatosky stated that longer terms do not mean that a person would be apolitical, and she does not think that it solves the problem of inordinate tax increases. She stated that she does not like the idea of four to six year terms because they are too long. She noted that a Board of Finance means less people involved in the process and she does not know how that is more democratic than fifty or so members on the RTM examining the budget. She questioned how this process would be more detailed than the current process which includes detailed examinations of the Board of Education budget, the Town Council, RTM. She stated that the budget is currently backed by financial facts and figures and best practices. She noted that a Board of Finance of non-professionals would not be any more apt to use correct financial procedures than a paid professional. She stated that she agreed with the speaker regarding undercutting professional staff, and she questioned if a Board of Finance would spur professional staff out the door.

Commissioner Dauphinais stated that she learned a lot about a Board of Finance in the past two weeks, and she stated that a Board of Finance is what small towns do in lieu of professional staff. She stated that a Board of Finance works with the town department heads, considers long and short term expenditure and revenue streams, and then presents the budget to the Town Council. She noted that she does not know of a town that has a Council/Manager form of government and a Board of Finance. She stated that if the Commission is moving toward a budget referendum, then Groton does not need a Board of Finance or a RTM. She stated that the Town Manager still goes through two budget reviews with a Board of Finance, so the problem of being less redundant is not solved. She concluded by stating that she is not sold on a Board of Finance.

Chair Pro Tem Aument reviewed correspondence he sent to the Commissioners pertaining to the role of the Board of Finance for the town of Bozrah. He noted that Bozrah has a Town Meeting/Board of Selectman form of government, and the Board of Finance monitors the revenue stream and receives data from the Tax Collector and the Treasurer quarterly, receives updates from the Selectmen and Superintendent regarding their budgets, and advises the Council on Capital spending. He stated that Trumbull has a Board of Finance/Selectmen/Town Meeting form of government, and Fairfield has a Board of Finance/Council/Manager/RTM form of government. He stated that he likes that a Board of Finance is more autonomous, fiscally conservative, and not moving forward with the status quo.

Commissioner Mello stated that he looked at the demographics of Groton versus other towns, and he is thinking about the makeup of the community. He noted that consolidation can take place, and it has its advantages. He noted that Groton is in no-man's land because at a population of 40,000, it could go either way. He noted that the Board of Finance would review the budget and not undercut the staff because of the Board's relationship with the Town Manager. He stated that he is looking at the budget referendum through various perspectives, and he noted there are people who cannot afford much more of a tax increase. He noted that a referendum in a community that does not have a lot of revenue could be catastrophic for school systems and future plans.

Commissioner Frink stated that a 6-year apolitical term means not being elected every two years and allows for taking a longer term view. He noted that less people and less democracy could be solved by a triggered referendum. He stated that the Town is reactive today, there is little input up-front, and we can do better. He stated that the community should define what it wants to be and spend its money on, the town staff builds the budget, the Board of Finance evaluates what can be afforded and how, and the elected officials on the Council are responsible to the people for what they want and what they get and how much they want to pay for it. He noted that he believes Groton would benefit from a Board of Finance.

Commissioner Granatosky questioned the purpose of the Town Council if the Board of Finance sets goals and determines what is affordable. She stated that the Town Council is supposed to be the policy making body. She stated that it seems that having a Board of Finance would be turning the future planning of the Town to a body that is solely interested in cost. She stated that government is not a business and exists to provide services. She stated that you need people to look long-term, are visionaries, and are interested in what is best for the community.

Commissioner Frink reviewed that the Town Council is responsible for the successful operation of the Town by prioritizing and delivering community wants and needs. He clarified that the Board of Finance simply determines how much those needs cost and how they will be paid for.

Commissioner Marley stated that the staff puts together the budget for the Town Manager, and the Board of Finance would evaluate what can be afforded and how it would pay for it. He stated that the department directors were not being fiscally conservative this last budget season. He stated that the RTM cut a proposal for upgraded computer monitors from the budget.

Commissioner White stated that she does not want to undercut the Town Manager, the Town Council acts as a body that has the vision, and she noted that the Board of Finance would act as review and oversight over revenue and expenses. She noted that accountability would be represented through the Board of Finance's ability to tell the Town Manager which budget items are affordable. She stated that the Board of Finance would have control over the budget. She stated that looking at cutting expenses needs to be strategic. She stated that the Board of Finance would look at the town holistically.

The Commissioners discussed the potential power of the Board of Finance in its ability to recommend budget changes versus the power to make cuts to the budget.

Commissioner Mello encouraged the Commission to look at efficiency. He noted that absolute representation would be a referendum.

Commissioner Granatosky stated that policy setting should be the role of the Town Council, and she noted that it seems like a Board of Finance would be set-up to cut in on the Town Manager and the Town Council.

Commissioner Kotowski stated that the problem is that taxes are going up too high every year. She noted that the level-services budget this year was an eight percent increase, the Town Council reduced the increase to six percent, and the RTM brought it down to 3.7 percent. She noted that this year there was a bipartisan coalition on the RTM that wanted to help tax payers. She noted that a 3.7 percent increase is still too high, and that is why there needs to be changes.

Chair Pro Tem Aument stated that the process can be what we make it. He stated that a Board of Finance's role can be determined by the Commission. He stated that if there is a budget referendum, which he is in favor of, something should be subtracted from the budget process. He stated that a Board of Finance replacing a RTM could be a check and balance and would be more focused on fiscal things and get timely information. He stated that there needs to be a feedback loop if a budget referendum fails.

Commissioner Marley stated that one thing he is apprehensive about is that the Board of Finance is an advisory board. He stated that in the past he had been frustrated with the RTM and its size, but he the RTM gives people the opportunity to get involved in the town and learn how it runs. He stated that a small Board of Finance abolishes somebody's opportunity to get involved in government.

Commissioner Granatosky stated that there is a lot of unhappiness with the way the current budget process is going, but she does not see it as a problem with the current government structure. She stated that the Council has provisions in the Charter that gives it the authority to direct the Town Manager. She questioned if the structure of the government is the problem or the people who have been elected.

Commissioner White agreed with Commissioner Granatosky, and she stated that budget direction can come from the Town Council. She noted that the Town Council has the right to return the budget to the Town Manager if it does not meet its goals. She stated that the Town Manager needs budget direction from the Town Council.

Commissioner Chase stated that the tax rate, expenses, and revenue need to be looked at as a package. She noted that if we want businesses and people to move here, we have to look at the tax rate. She stated that she does not know if she will be able to stay here when she retires. She stated that the same people are on the ballot over and over again, so they keep getting re-elected. She stated that she likes that the Board of Finance would be apolitical.

Commissioner Kotowski stated that she agrees that the Town Council should direct the Town Manager on the budget. She stated that she heard from a Town Councilor that the Town Council informed the Town Manager that he should have a budget that had a zero percent increase, but he submitted one that had an eight percent increase.

Commissioner Marley agreed that the process is broken, and he confirmed that the Town Council asked the Town Manager to have a budget with a zero percent tax increase. He stated that we want people to move to Groton. He noted that the RTM approved the appropriation to re-write the zoning regulations so that it makes it attractive for businesses to move here.

Commissioner Mello stated that 80 percent of any budget is personnel costs, and if you instruct the Town Manager to have a budget with a zero percent increase, then the

message is reduce staffing in departments. He stated that the emphasis should be focused on creating a budget that works for the community, and Groton needs to be attractive for young people to stay here. He stated that the cutting only mentality will make Groton implode on itself because of a loss of services as a result of the loss of staff.

Commissioner Kotowski stated an overseeing body, such as a Finance Board, with the public's input, would make Groton more attractive. She stated that Groton needs to reduce its government.

Chair Hauber referenced a recent election in the City of Groton. She stated that she had a conversation with somebody who declared that he or she was voting along party lines. She questioned if people would research referendum topics before voting on them.

Commissioner Kotowski stated that the voters are willing to move forward with capital improvement project as evidenced by the passage of the recent school referendum.

Chair Pro Tem Aument stated the Commission can come together and come up with a budget process. He stated that he would like to see Town Council/Town Manager form of government with a finance check that looks at revenue. He stated that the middle ground may be eliminating the RTM with a Board of Finance and a triggered budget referendum. He encouraged Commissioners to keep open minds.

Commissioner Marley agreed that Groton needs to be attractive, and he questioned at what point tax increases make Groton unattractive. He questioned at what point businesses, such as Electric Boat, will look to leave Groton because of tax increases.

Commissioner Granatosky stated that if we want people to stay in Groton, then there needs to be a reason to want to be here. She stated that the Town Council/Town Manager/Board of Finance/referendum with a trigger form of government adds a layer of government.

Commissioner Mello stated that the Town Council could be charged with doing the budget.

Commissioner Frink referenced the list of referrals he distributed earlier in the meeting. He stated that the Town Council is not spending time discussing the budget because of all the work it has. He stated that a Board of Finance would help the Town Council with the budget process. He stated that the budget discussion is often the last item on the Council agenda and does not get addressed, and the Board of Finance could be elected by the people, would be accountable to the people, and would be focused on budget items.

Commissioner Dauphinais stated that the past couple years have been extraordinary because of the loss of the Pfizer building and State revenue. She stated that the two

recent tax increases are unusual and do not reflect more than the loss of revenue and the wrong people in the right positions. She noted that the recent tax increases are not a result of Charter issues, but circumstances beyond our control with Pfizer and the State, and in the Council not giving direction strongly enough to the Town Manager and the Manager not following directives and not being held accountable. She agreed that there is too much government in Groton, and she stated that she will not support a larger government. She stated that people need to do their jobs in Groton and perhaps there should be more authority given to elected officials, and there needs to be more solicitation of public input on the budget at the front end. She stated that Groton is the best managed town in Southeastern Connecticut and has one of the lowest mill rates. She stated that she would like to change the Charter to streamline government and to hold people more accountable.

Chair Hauber stated that the Council needs to use its tools and should have committees.

Commissioner Frink suggested that Commissioner Dauphinais come up with ways in which to hold people accountable for the next meeting.

Commissioner Marley left the meeting at 8:08 p.m.

In response to Chair Pro Tem Aument, Commissioner Granatosky stated that the Mayor works with the Town Manager to set the agenda.

Commissioner Frink stated that the Town Manager sets most of the agenda items.

Chair Hauber stated that the Mayor and the Town Manager setting the agenda works well.

Commissioner Granatosky stated that the Council should place items on the agenda if it does not like the direction things are going, and most items are placed on the agenda by the Town Manager because he or she oversees the day-to-day operations of the Town.

Commissioner Frink stated that the Commission could address grant approval in the Charter.

The Commissioners discussed determining the details of a Finance Board at the next meeting.

Commissioner Granatosky stated that the Commission should look at how a Finance Board would fit with the other parts of government that the Commission has agreed it wants to keep.

In response to Commissioner Frink, Commissioner Granatosky stated that she is in favor of the Charter the way it is, and Commissioner Dauphinais stated that she is not in favor of a RTM.

The Commission determined that the following will be on the next agenda:

Government Structure

- a. RTM
- b. Board of Finance
- c. Referendum

VI. ADJOURMENT

Motion to adjourn was made by Commissioner Frink, seconded by Chair Hauber. The motion carried unanimously 9-0-0.

Chair Pro Tem Aument adjourned the meeting at 8:24 p.m.

Attest:

Scott Aument
Secretary