

Charter Revision George Demetrion

Comments for 4-26 meeting

Main Concern

As indicated in my revised citizens' post, I have argued persistently that the strong mayor vs. town manager debate was given short shrift by the Commission. Specifically, other than allocating a session in September on the town manager session, there was very little substantive discussion among the Commission members dispassionately exploring the pros and cons of this option. Moreover, the questions posed to the spokespersons for the town manager option were largely pro forma and the limited discussions which followed in other meetings on the two options were extremely narrowly focused, in that they did not actually dive into the substance of the matter, in any serious way.

Comments on Strong Mayor Option supported by a Chief Administrative Officer

Based on a close review of most of the Commission meetings, I grasped the value in the initial proposed solution (12-07-2021) that included a strong mayor, supported by a full-time administrative professional that would give the mayor considerable flexibility in defining the specific parameters of the job specifications in any administration in any year. I still see its value and hope that the current Democratic vs. Republican impasse between whether the mayor "may or shall" appoint a Chief Administrative Officer (CAO) can be synthesized by allowing the mayor maximum scope in defining the specific duties for a given term or period. To consider the personnel needs of the current mayor at hand, if the need is for that person to serve as a project manager for some period, there should be no bureaucratic impediments which limits that. That is, if the intent is to embrace the strong mayor concept, he or she should not be shackled by seeking to put in place a quasi-town manager by making the specifications of the job or the hiring requirements overly prescriptive. In short, I caution the commissioners not to create a *structure* that is going to impede the *functions* of what is needed to empower a strong mayor by limiting the authority and resources needed to carry out what a given mayor deems as the central tasks of a given administration.

Back to the Strong Mayor vs. Town Manager Issue and a Need for a Proviso to be Inserted into the Revised Charter

That said, I don't think the critical matter of providing a more substantial discussion on the issue of governance—specifically, the benefits and drawbacks of a strong mayor vs. town manager—should be ignored by this Commissioners. As articulated in a previous citizen comment, I recommend:

that a notation be built into the new Charter for a possible revision on this issue somewhere between 2027-2030. By that time, the strong mayor, supported by a new professional administrator, would have been in place for at least five years, with the prospect, as well, that Mayor Walsh would have completed his tenure. This would

provide a decent interval of time in a post-Walsh governing reality to assess the viability of the strong mayor/CAO model. It would also provide time for a committee or working group to be set up, perhaps in 2024, to review the issue of governance, including the prospect of transforming to a town manager, as East Hartford moves into the 2030s. Such changes in governing, as deemed necessary, as determined by the sustained work of such a committee or working group, and supported by a public vote, would allow for any changes needed without the need for a new charter. The specific scope and composition of this proposed group or committee would need to be determined by the Town Council.

https://www.easthartfordct.gov/sites/g/files/vyhlf526/f/uploads/revised_george_demetrion_lerrer_on_the_eh_charter_commission_revision_process_12-21-2021.pdf

The critical issue remains that of governance in a post-Walsh administrative setting and the need to set up an authorized group or committee that can examine this matter in depth.

The current Charter Commission has done valiant work, but, given that a new charter will likely remain in place into the mid-2030s, the critical matter of the relationship between the town's executive and legislative branches requires a more sustained examination.

Questions Seeking a Timely Response

1. Is it legally permissible to add such a proviso into the charter that I am recommending?
2. If the answer is yes, are there reasons why it should not be done?
3. If the answer is no, what options are available, short of a charter revision, to revisit the issue of the prospect of shifting governance toward a town manager format if that is deemed necessary or desirable?
4. If there are no options available, what would be the significance of this dilemma if the demands of governance by 2030 require a significant revisit of this core issue?
5. In short, would structure prevail over the functioning needs of town government as East Hartford moves toward the year 2030? Or are there formats and strategies in place that would enable the town leaders to make the changes needed to assure the best possible forms of governance are in place to meet the dynamic needs of the town?

c.c. M. Walsh, R. Kehoe