

To: East Hartford Charter Commission Committee

From: George Demetrion

Re: Commentary and questions

November 22, 2021

Preliminary Items

- I am in support of a 4-year term for town CEO–Mayor or Town Manager.
- In principle, I support of 4-year term for Town Council Members. While such a shift may not be realistic, in terms of potential Members being willing to serve for 4 years, if East Hartford moves forward with a 4-year CEO while holding town council elections every two years, voter participation will be quite low in the year that the CEO position is not on the ballot or under consideration.
- It would be worthwhile to hold town elections in even years to correspond to state and federal elections to drive up voter participation. The downside is it may dilute voter concentration from the local elections. Trade-offs should be thoughtfully weighed.

Strong Mayor versus Town Manager Option

As I understand the options under consideration include:

1. Strong mayor with Chief Operating Officer (COO) to assist and to serve as a direct report to the mayor.
2. Town Manager.
3. Question: Is a strong Mayor without COO position under consideration?
4. Comment: The issue is not whether the town should hire an administrative professional, but what governing structures are most needed to best position the town to meet the challenges and opportunities of governing during the next 10-15 years

In response Melody Currey's East Hartford Gazette column (11-11-2021), two things stand out, with which I agree:

- That the current Mayor be given “an opportunity to evaluate and make recommendations to the commission before any decisions are made.” I cannot imagine this not happening *well* before any decisions are made. Am I correct to assume this?
- That the town's democratic process and its core values and identity be preserved in any shift in governance while seeking to form an effective mode of leadership in meeting the challenges of the town's nearer and mid-term future.

Comment: To this, I would add that due attention be paid not only past and present values and identity which have shifted significantly since the time where I first became connected to EH in the 1950s and 1960s, but to anticipated near future values and identity, projecting outward to the 2030s.

The core question, then becomes, what is the driver here? What is the working vision for East Hartford that would shape the work of the town's CEO and Town Council? I can only assume it

is some version of getting the town on a sustainable path forward in terms of economic development, as reflected in current discussions of Showcase, Silver Lane Plaza, Rentschler Field, the River Front, various civic development and awareness projects, and a lot else that is beginning to emerge through the mayor's office.

Based on these presuppositions, I assume that the strong mayor with a COO (or equivalent type of administrative support and the town manager form of government are what's seriously on the table, even though the next two to four years will demonstrate what a strong mayor with substantial town management sensibilities can accomplish without the added layer of another high-level highly paid administrative manager. I also discern that while the commission is taking a nonpartisan approach in working through what a new charter would look like that the Democratic leadership favors the strong mayor-COO option while, in general, the Republican leadership favors the town manager approach. While I am aware that the commission is seeking to act on a nonpartisan manner, it remains a fact that the breakdown is precisely on party lines. This merits more than a little reflection in which the implicit politics may be masking some of the deeper issues that need to be addressed.

I have a much better appreciation for the work the commission has done in researching these issues than I had when I initially tried to contact Don and when I wrote my Gazette letter, including two in-depth meetings with the West Hartford Town manager and Hartford's COO and the former Mayor of Danbury. I am not sure the commission has engaged in the level of research that was articulated in one of the August meetings in bringing in various former mayors from EH as well as getting more background on the town manager form of government.

On the latter, it's interesting that all the surrounding municipalities except for Hartford have town managers and that there are around 30 town managers throughout the state—broadly the same amount as strong mayors. It seems that on its face, both forms of government can, in principle, work well, and both, I assume have various built-in problems.

In her 11-11 Gazette column, Melody Currey pointed to several problems with the town manager form of government. It would be instructive to hear directly from town management reps about these critiques as well as about the evident strengths of this model. Specifically:

1. What accomplishments have been derived in each of the localities through the town management form of governance; what problems persist or have been intensified by this form of government?
2. How much variation is there in the town manager model and to what extent can this form of governance be modified to address real time needs and various contingencies that may be particular to a given town?
3. How have democratic political processes been impeded or strengthened through the town manager model; what implications can be drawn for East Hartford?
4. What would you recommend East Hartford consider before moving in the direction of a town manager?

With Mike Walsh, East Hartford has the best of both worlds:

1. Someone who can function with the full skill set of a town manager.
2. A strong mayor who is attuned to the political and civic climate of the town and can act effectively as a citizen-based servant leader.

Given these attributes, Mayor Walsh, will, in effect, embody both roles in his governing philosophy and practice. The question, then, becomes, what will EH look like in a post Walsh governing reality? In terms of governance, what does East Hartford need, currently, and into the foreseeable future, as the town leadership seeks to carry out a somewhat ambitious agenda in positioning the town to transform itself in some significant ways without losing its identity and responsiveness to its various constituencies? Grappling with these issues represents the core work of the Charter Revision Commission, which will require much discernment.