

## **George Demetrion Second Submission for 12-21-2021 Charter Commission Meeting**

### **Preliminaries**

- In the 08-24-2021 at approximately the 3:00 minute mark of the Charter Commission Meeting, Chair Bell spoke of the prospect of asking Scott Shanley, Town Mayor of Manchester, who will be retiring on or around July 15, 2022, to speak to the commission. ([https://www.journalinquirer.com/towns/manchester/shanley-to-retire-as-manchester-s-top-administrator/article\\_bb0cb646-8e33-11eb-831e-779c494d52fd.html](https://www.journalinquirer.com/towns/manchester/shanley-to-retire-as-manchester-s-top-administrator/article_bb0cb646-8e33-11eb-831e-779c494d52fd.html)) Has that happened? If so, I missed it. Since Manchester has had a town management form of government since the late 1940s and its demographics approximates East Hartford; the Commission would be well served by engaging in a substantial discussion with Mr. Shanley to include a probing of the critical issues it has over this form of governance. Based on various commentary of committee members, critical issues include:
  - The issue of a singular point of contact in holding the chief executive officer accountable, which in the strong mayoral form of governance, is the mayor. How does this pertain in a town manager form of government? Ask Mr. Shanley.
  - The potential impact of the town manager form of governance on the town's democratic process since the manager is appointed by the council rather than elected. How has the Town of Manchester grappled with this issue? This matter was partially addressed by some of the speakers at the 09-20-2021 meeting in a general way, but it would be useful to gain Mr. Shanley's view for a local perspective.
  - The concern that the shift to a town manager would represent a radical change of government, which would pose a serious problem if it were adopted in the revised Charter but proved to be ineffective. The Chair prefers a more incremental approach, which continuation with the strong mayor, supported by a professional administrator. In principle, the opposite point can be made—by not moving in the direction of a town manager, the commission would have lost an opportunity to create the type of leadership the town would need to meet the challenges of the early 2030s. I will discuss this issue below, but it would be useful to hear from Mr. Shanley on this, as well as his perspective on what would be involved in shifting a government of the size and complexity to a town management form.
- For the record, in the 08-24-2021 meeting, around the 6:00 minute mark, Chair Bell referenced the potential viability of obtaining feedback from some of the previous EH mayors to talk about their process and working with directors and their [recommendations] on form of government. This is not a major issue in that the committee has heard from the last three mayors, including the previous mayor who serves on the commission. It is abundantly clear that any other mayor would be given ample opportunity to speak if he or she desired to do so. I raise the issue here simply to clarify the record. This was brought up on the 08-24 meeting, though perhaps only in passing.

## **Current Work to Date**

I have closely listened to all the meetings and have participated in some. I am struck by the depth of discourse and probing of all the members and recommend anyone interested in charter reform, or local government, more broadly, to closely review the proceedings. I am also impressed with the quest to work toward a viable consensus in grappling with the issues surrounding the charter revision process, notwithstanding underlying political differences based on divergent views on what comprises effective governing. I am referring to politics in the best sense of the term—an Aristotelian view, if you will—as an essential vocation of the active citizen in the public square. In this, you are all enacting the statecraft of politics in the most consummate sense of the term, through the art of public persuasion and statesmanship, which, in my view, merits public recognition and gratitude.

Also, the commission has demonstrated ability for effective compromise, as is evident in the resolution of 12-07-2021 that, instead of recommending a strong mayor with a Chief Organizing Officer COO), proposed a strong mayor supported by a new professional position responsible for managing the day-to-day operations of the town and report directly to the mayor. That may seem like a minor change; however, it makes the administrative support position considerably more flexible, a shift that emerged because of a great deal of dialogue among the Commission members, reflecting, also their desire to address charter revision on this matter through a hybrid model that keeps both strong mayor and the skill set of a town manager. This is all to the credit of the East Hartford citizens who sit on the Charter Commission Revision.

## **Reflection**

My understanding is that the Charter Commission was tasked by one the Town Council, meetings this past summer to address the issue of adding an administrative professional to provide support for the mayor in dealing with day-to-day management issues. This would free up the mayor to focus on a broader set of issues than the minutiae of daily operations and thereby be more effective in concentrating on the longer-range needs of the town. I'm not sure how it emerged among the commissioners, but early into the process, the prospect of considering a town manager form of governance surfaced as an alternative to the strong mayoral model. As the meetings progressed, there also emerged the prospect of various hybrid forms of governance with a strong mayor supported by a professional administrator who would possess many of the skills and orientation of a town manager. At the 09-20-2021 meeting, various speakers presented the case for a town management form of government. That discussion was robust, including a good many questions by the commissioners. Interestingly, Mr. Shanley, the town manager from Manchester, was not present, nor was he present at any other meeting, as far as I know.

The 09-20 meeting followed up by a meeting on 10-12-2021 that included presentations by Hartford's COO and the former mayor of Danbury to present the case for a strong mayor, with the commissioners asking a similar set of discussions. Either at that meeting or soon thereafter, a preliminary vote was taken focusing on the singular issue of whether the commission should support a town manager or strong mayoral form of government. That was a 5-4 vote in favor of the strong mayor, which, I believe, broke down exactly on party lines.

The next meeting was scheduled on 10-26-2021. Given the depth of the presentations on the two forms of government and the divergent of views of the commissioners, I would have thought that the 10-26 meeting offered an excellent opportunity to discuss the pros and cons of the two forms of government in some depth. Unfortunately, that did not take place. In fact, the bulk of that meeting focused on probing the details of what governance, based on a strong mayor supported by a professional administrator, would look like, including an examination of the various problems that would likely come up and need to be resolved.

I do not know why the meeting went in this direction. There were a few minor attempts to incorporate the town management form of government into the 10-26 meeting, but they were overwhelmed by the energy that drove the discussion toward what seemed to be an emerging hybrid consensus of wanting to keep a strong mayor while bringing in someone with the sensibilities of a town manager, but one that would report to the mayor rather than to the town council. This focus consumed the energies of even those who had voted for a town manager, but now seemed to be gravitating, almost imperceptibly toward a hybrid model. Whether that was because they sensed that a purified town manager model would not gain majority traction, or that they were beginning to sense the viability of a hybrid model, which would provide them with much of the substance of what they were seeking within the strong mayor form, is beyond my capacity to discern; I presume, both issues were at play here.

The problem is that in shifting to this more process-oriented direction, the commissioners were beginning to define the parameters of their options *prior to* their own in-depth analysis of the pros and cons of each option, which, however understandable, was also a lost opportunity. While the Commission received a great deal of information on the two forms of government in the 09-20 and 10-12 commission meetings, the in-depth pro and con discussion *among themselves* never took place, as far as I have been able to determine, in the public format of the commission recharter meetings.

Nonetheless, given their charge by the Town Council, the constraint of the time limits they were called upon to operate, the political culture of the Democratic Party in town, which strongly pressed toward the strong mayor option, and East Hartford's own history with a strong mayor, this shift toward a hybrid solution is understandable. In fact, it is one that is utterly reasonable, in which the decision of the 12-07-2021 meeting to propose a strong mayor, supported by a new professional position responsible for managing the day-to-day operations of the town and report directly to the mayor, carries much value. This discernment has been the result of a good deal of substantial work and reflection on the part of the commissioners.

## **Proposal**

As part of a five-year plan, such a resolution would make a lot of sense. It would strengthen the position of the mayor and allow him, in this case, to better accomplish the challenging vision he has for the town underlying the 25 projects that he has identified in the "Tower." As stated elsewhere, the issue at hand is what does governance look like in a post-Walsh governing reality, given that the proposed Charter Revision that would likely remain in place through the mid-2030s. Given East Hartford's multi-decade tradition of governing through a strong mayor, it was

probably not realistic for a serious consideration of the town manager form of government within the time constraints and guidelines of the charter commission.

Nonetheless, I contend that the town manager versus strong mayor discussion requires a longer examination, one that should be reconsidered a few years from now. For this reason, I support the 12-07 proposal as a working statement with the proviso 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 this 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 the charter revision members, and supported by a public vote, would be allowed through an amendment process established in the new charter. The specific scope and composition of this proposed group or committee would need to be determined by the Town Council.