

A Modest Proposal
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On Tuesday, May 17, the Town Council will conduct a public hearing on recommendations from the Charter Revision Commission for possible approval for the November ballot. The Commission posted the changes, which I encourage the readers of the Gazette to review. (<https://www.easthartfordct.gov/charter-revision-commission>)

Our Town Charter is the town's governing framework. Changes made and, if adopted in 2022, will likely remain in place through the mid-2030s. So, it is important to get them as right as possible.

I commend the volunteer commissioners for their 9-month commitment to the review process. It was a lot of work, and involved many thankless hours, both on-line and in person at Town Hall with COVID-19 protocols in place. Discussions were thoughtful as this group worked through a variety of complex issues.

As noted last week, one of the major issues centered on the desirability of providing the mayor with a Chief Administrative Officer (CAO). Given the ambitious goals as reflected in Mayor Mike Walsh's "Control Tower," more than 25 important priorities and projects, I support an expansion of administrative resources.

(https://www.easthartfordct.gov/sites/g/files/vyhlf526/f/uploads/mayor_walshs_control_tower.pdf)

As I wrote last week, I thought the commissioners missed an opportunity. So I called for a proviso to establish a group or committee to re-examine, in five years, whether East Hartford would be better served by the continuance of a strong mayor model or a town managerial form of government. (See Gazette letter, May 5, 2022, page 5.)

Now I raise another issue. Until late in their proceedings, the commission thought it would be best to extend the mayor's term to four years. Running a political campaign every two years is time consuming. While there was broad agreement on this proposal, most commissioners decided to keep all other town elections on a two-year basis. The reasoning being they would maintain maximum accountability to the voter.

Moreover, the Board of Education was mandated by statute to hold elections every two years, which served as a motivating factor in the need to keep all elections (except for mayor) at two years, for consistency, sake, as well as for that of maximum voter accountability.

Some of us saw the inherent problem in this from the get-go, especially, considering state statute, 9-164, which mandates that municipal elections be held on odd years.

The problem is that turnout on election years without a mayoral race might be low - perhaps as little as 10 percent. That might lessen the legitimacy of those off-year elections as being not truly representative election contests. So, based on that reasoning, the commissioners reluctantly reverted to keeping all elections on a two-year term, including that of mayor.

I view this as the tail wagging the dog. Especially as most commissioners seemingly regarded adoption of the four-year term for East Hartford's mayor favorably from a policy perspective.

From the proceedings in fact, some favored four-year town council terms. But they were conflicted from a representational standpoint. Most favored the more frequent two-year elections process for town council. I don't feel the commissioners ever managed to resolve this contradiction of having a four-year election for mayor, and every two years elections for town council when municipal election year voter turnout now hovers around 20 percent even for the mayoral race. The prospect of extremely low turnouts for off year town council elections meant the resolve to make the change was simply not there.

Let me offer another proposal. Since the mayor's and the Town Council's work is so intricately connected, place them on the same four-year election cycle. If the Board of Education elections need to remain on a two-year cycle because of a state statute, so be it. But the two-year Board of Education cycle ought not be the reason not to have the mayor and Town Council elected for four-year terms.

Making such a change opens the opportunity to establish term limits. Specifically, the mayor could be limited to two, or at most, three, four-year terms with Council members elected to serve a similar maximum of 8 or 12 years.

This change, and my 5-year re-examination of the town manager versus strong mayor proviso, discussed in last week's letter, would represent transformative change, change which would help resolve long-term issues related to town governance, policy development, and progress. It would help establish the long-range planning East Hartford has lacked.

I encourage our Town Council to reconsider (for those members on the Charter Commission) and consider (for those who did not) these proposals. The Charter Commissioners can reconvene and make such changes. Or the Town Council could make them on its own.

Carpe Diem, as our East Hartford motto states. "Seize the Day." And if such changes are too bold, nothing forestalls revisiting our Town Charter and changing it back.

How do East Hartford readers stand? I encourage you all to visit the Town Charter Revision homepage. If you have not already done so, do your homework as citizens. Play close attention to what is (or is not) proposed.

Make your voice heard. Next Tuesday's Town Council public hearing is the forum for so doing.