

**CITY OF NORWALK
CHARTER REVISION COMMISSION
REGULAR MEETING
MAY 28, 2025**

ATTENDANCE: Tyler Fairbairn, Chair; Carl Dickens, Vice Chair; Jo Bennett, Atty. Ed Camacho, Jim Clark, Douglas Hempstead, John Levin, Rick McQuaid, Tanya Rhodes-Small

OTHERS: Atty. Steve Mednick; Jared Schmitt, CFO

CALL TO ORDER

Mr. Fairbairn called the final meeting of the Charter Revision Commission to order at 6:33 p.m.

ROLL CALL

Mr. Fairbairn called the roll. A quorum was present.

PUBLIC PARTICIPATION

[0:41]

There was no one that indicated that they wished to address the Commission at this time.

DISCUSSION

[1:00]

A. Discussion of 5/20 Public Hearing

Mr. Fairbairn then read a list of the various suggestions from the Public Hearing including strong support regarding the need for the Minority Party Representation; support for maintaining the need for a mandatory Charter Revision every five years instead of every ten years; an offer from a resident to assist in making the Charter more accessible via visual summaries and graphics. There was a request to extend the authority of the Common Council pertaining to the Operating Budget regarding line item control. Other suggestions included increasing the size of the Council to five representatives per District, electing the BET, imposing term limits, increasing the length of the terms for the Common Council and Mayor to four years; creation of an assistant City Clerk position serving the Common Council versus the Mayor's Office; support for five MPR seats At Large and increasing the Council with three members per District.

Mr. Hempstead said that at the end of the meeting, there was an open ended question on Mason's Rules. Atty. Mednick said that the issue was MPR and this had been brought up during the Public Hearing.

PUBLIC PARTICIPATION CONT'D

[3:44]

Ms. Diane Lauricella of Little Fox Lane said that she had been unable to raise her online hand to indicate that she would like to address the Commission. Ms. Lauricella said that she was interested in how government functions. She said that she appreciated how much time everyone invested in this project. She said that she felt that there should be a larger number of Council Members because the Council Members don't have time to do their due diligence. The people should be able to demand more due diligence. This is uninspiring. She felt that Stamford had too many on their council but Norwalk has too few. She said that she wished they had spent more time on that.

She said that Minority Party Representation should be addressed because Norwalk is an outlier. Running a good campaign is important but she felt that they should let the public decide.

Ms. Lauricella said she was very sad that that there was gender inequity on many of the Boards and Commissions. She would love to have it included in the Charter. Neither this administration or previous administrations had done enough to make sure there is gender parity on the boards. She said that she would love to see it as an ordinance but felt it should be included in the Charter because they don't know who will be elected in the future.

DISCUSSION CONT'D

[7:03]

Mr. Fairbairn explained that he had gone back and analyzed the break out of the Councils back to 2013, when it was a split Council. He said that he was not in support of it. Mr. Fairbairn then listed the party breakout on the Council. He noted that the major shift happened in 2017 when the President became a contentious issue, which may have had an impact on the composition of the Council. At the last meeting they had discussed having two of the five At Large seats dedicated to the MPR candidates.

Mr. Hempstead then recounted the Knopp administration in 2001 where there was a Democratic Mayor and completely solid Common Council. He reminded everyone that there were times in 2017 and 2019 that he was the lone Republican on the Council and this was followed by Tom Livingston being the single Republican. Currently, Ms. Dunn is the single MPR member.

He pointed out that this had never been brought up before and that if a candidate ran and won, they won. In his recollection, the Democratic Party had a minimum of two seats. He said that he would like to bring this to the table again and noted that the first vote failed. The longer term issue Mr. Hempstead felt was the number of Council Members the City should have. He said that he felt this issue should be referred to the Council for discussion.

Mr. Hempstead said his intended motion was to remove the issue of the Minority Party Representation from the table in order to discuss having two of the At Large council seats designated as Minority Party Representation seats. Discussion followed about the previous

proposals for increasing the Council seats through different means and designating party representation.

Mr. Clark suggested that if they added five more Council Members, one member per district, it would lighten the work load and then they could discuss party seat designations.

Atty. Camacho said that he was appalled about the political party that was so opposed to diversity and inclusion based on characteristics that cannot be changed, such as their sex, their gender, their sexual identity. He felt that this was not sufficient for people to be okay with diversity and inclusion on that basis. However having a basis that can change, such as the Republican Party can decide that it wishes to govern and individuals in the Republican Party can decide that the party can be an agent for good. Being a Republican is not an immutable characteristic like sex, gender and race are. So a party that is insisting on diversity and inclusion for political purposes but is hellbent on thinking that diversity and inclusion of people that can't change who they are what they are is particularly upsetting to him. He felt this was quintessentially anti-democratic. [18:52]

Atty. Camacho pointed out that currently they are living in a nation where approximately half of the nation has no say in government including the Senate and the Congress. If people continue to elect people that don't believe in government, it will end up in a situation where the people cannot and do not govern themselves. [20:30]

The Republican Party locally can begin this conversation to state that they believe in government and that the people can govern themselves rather than suggesting that even if the people don't elect the candidates because they don't believe in government, they need a seat at the table in order to undo the very thing that they have been elected to do. [21:00]

Atty. Camacho said that during his time on the Council, there was one Republican member who voted against every single issues that was before them. If that is the face of the Republican Party and that was the face of the Republican Party on the Council, then the Republicans aren't going to get a seat at the table because they aren't serious about this stuff. [22:00]

This will be a race towards mediocrity once the City starts to give out seats to people that the public had not mandated to cast the majority of the votes for. Atty. Camacho concluded his comments by saying that he vigorously opposed this for all those reasons. [22:40]

Mr. Clark asked Atty. Camacho if he was also opposed to adding more Council seats. Atty. Camacho said he did agree with adding more Council Members.

Mr. Dickens said that he wished to clarify what the problem was that the Commissioners were trying to solve. He asked if it was more Council Members, more representation because the community has grown. He reminded everyone that if someone is elected to the Council, they are assigned to a variety of committees. However, if someone is the lone representation regardless of what party the Council Member belongs to, they have to attend every single one of those

meetings, which is a great deal of work. This is an issue where there needs to be more Council seats. With a population of 100,000 people and more people moving in, the new residents bring different issues.

Mr. Dickens said that he was not clear on the other issue and he felt that it was the party leadership and party membership's job to have their candidate elected to office. This shouldn't be legislated. Mr. Dickens said that he was not clear as to what issue this would solve by putting it in the Charter.

Ms. Rhodes-Small said that she agreed with Mr. Clark about adding another seat and felt that it should not be taken out of the voters' hands. The residents in a District will just vote for their candidates rather than designating a seat for someone.

Mr. Dickens noted that according to the voter registration, the Democrats outnumber the Republicans by two to one. Ms. Rhodes-Small replied that her generation makes their candidates earn their votes. Atty. Camacho said that it was the unaffiliated voters that now make the difference. Discussion followed.

Mr. McQuaid noted that when he was on the Council, there was a different atmosphere and it didn't matter as much whether someone had a D or an R after their name. That has changed in the last few years. He added that if the Council does not have a good mix of members, it doesn't matter what their affiliation is or what their representation is. This is a trend that the Council has gone through before.

Mr. Hempstead said that this Commission was supposed to be a non-partisan group that would be changing parts of the City Charter, which is what they were asked to do along with any suggestions or comments that they had. Getting into politics on the national or local level is not what they were asked to do. He said that in his four decades of service, he had seen both sides of the aisle act inappropriately, doing inappropriate things and say inappropriate things. That's not the question. [33:00]

He pointed out that in the case of District D, both candidates qualify as members of a minority party. The MPR is not limited to the Republican Party. Looking at historical data, at one point, there were 13 Council Members, and then it moved to 15 and it may increase to 20. He said that changing the Districts rather than the number of Council Members would change the entire infrastructure. Discussion followed about the details.

Ms. Bennett asked why Norwalk was an outlier. Mr. Fairbairn explained that the legal justification was that the way that the district are geographically determined. Atty. Mednick said that in the State of Connecticut for the NPR is that if you have an At Large system, you have to have NPR. Since Norwalk has Districts, they don't have to have NPR. Large municipalities like Norwalk that have Districts have adopted NPR, but they were not required to do so. He gave the details for the At Large campaign process.

Atty. Camacho pointed out that there was no reason they couldn't have an even number of Council Members. He said that he was not tied to 20 members and would be happy with 18 members. He said that it wasn't just a national party problem but a local problem. The Republican Town Committee does not have any young people on it. He said that it is up to the party to figure out what it has to do to attract younger people. [38:15]

**** MR. CLARK MOVED TO ADD ONE COUNCIL MEMBER PER DISTRICT FOR A TOTAL OF FIVE MORE MEMBERS ON THE COUNCIL FOR A TOTAL OF 20 COUNCIL MEMBERS.**

Mr. Hempstead asked if it would take effect in 2027.

**** MR. CLARK MOVED TO AMEND HIS MOTION TO ADD ONE COUNCIL MEMBER PER DISTRICT FOR A TOTAL OF FIVE MORE MEMBERS ON THE COUNCIL FOR A TOTAL OF 20 COUNCIL MEMBERS TO TAKE EFFECT IN 2027.**

Mr. Clark said that he felt that there were too few women on the various boards and committees. While he agreed that they needed more robust representation in all the areas of the City, it is a recruitment issue, not a Charter issue.

Ms. Rhodes-Small said the MPR shouldn't just be based on the political parties because that can change. The public comments have been focused on the political parties, not about having more women, Hispanic, African Americans or Asians. No one is talking about including everyone just as long as someone has a R behind their political affiliation. [43:00]

Mr. McQuaid pointed out that this year, the City had two of the three candidates running for Mayor that were women. Times have changed.

Mr. Levin said that the problem that they were trying to address by talking about MPR. He felt that the main issue had been lost. He discussed a January 18th email that he had sent to the Commissioners about the problem that Norwalk now has with elections. This is the fact that they the five At Large Council Seats for the 2023 municipal election received 55% of the total votes, but they won all five seats. 45% of the other voters are the ones who are probably saying "Where is my representation?"

The MPR is not supposed to be a carve out for any one individual party or minority. He said that he wished the country did not have a two party system, but it does. Since 55% of the voters selected the At Large candidates, the other 45% ended up with no representation at all. Norwalk's constituents don't feel represented. This method shuts out a number of voters.

Mr. Levin said that there are a number of different methods for electing people and the MPR is the one that is allowed. He mentioned cumulative voting, which could be a way to address this type of situation, but it is not allowed in Connecticut. MPR is the second best choice in Mr. Levin's view.

He added that the way the minority party representation was worded was that the majority party may not have more than half the seats plus one. This would mean that with the At Large seats, the majority party would be limited to no more than three of those five seats. The two remaining seats would go to whoever was not a member of the majority party and had the highest number of votes. Discussion followed about the percentages of votes.

**** THE MOTION TO ADD ONE COUNCIL MEMBER PER DISTRICT FOR A TOTAL OF FIVE MORE MEMBERS ON THE COUNCIL FOR A TOTAL OF 20 COUNCIL MEMBERS TO TAKE EFFECT IN 2027 PASSED WITH SEVEN (7) IN FAVOR (BENNETT, CAMACHO, CLARK, HEMPSTEAD, LEVIN, MCQUAID AND RHODES-TAYLOR) AND TWO (2) ABSTENTIONS (FAIRBAIRN AND DICKENS).**

It was noted that this increase does not include MPR.

Atty. Mednick said that he had previously advised everyone that there is no expressly granted authority in the State of Connecticut that would permit the City to have term limits. He noted that there were Charters that had them but added it was a different issue.

Mr. Fairbairn said that one of the public speakers had expressed support for leaving the mandatory Charter Revision limit at five years. He added that the Commission had already voted on changing the mandatory Charter Revision to every 10 years.

**** MR. HEMPSTEAD MOVED TO RETAIN THE ORIGINAL FIVE YEAR MANDATORY CHARTER REVISION LANGUAGE.**

Mr. McQuaid said that he agreed with this and noted that the City was now reviewing their Charter which was created in 1934. Even after two years, the Commission is making changes about how the boards and commissions are composed. He felt that having it every five years would be good.

Ms. Bennett pointed out that people develop best practices over time. Mr. Clark said that there was nothing stopping them from deciding in five years that they could wait another five years. Atty. Mednick pointed out that the Council has the discretion to hold a Charter Revision every year, if they wished to. The idea of the mandatory five or ten year review is to make sure that future Councils do review the Charter regularly.

Mr. Dickens said that he was in favor of a five year review because things change quickly and it would keep things more updated. Discussion followed.

Mr. Levin said that the previous Commission had designated that this Commission should be called and charged with considering four year terms and also to finish up the previous Commission's unfinished business. He felt that the Commissions did not create inherent instability. This Commission has been profound for him and he felt that it would make local

government better and the city would be more democratic. The population changed, the technology has changed and the Overton Window has moved. He felt that five years that was previously designated was good. Ten years is too long.

Ms. Rhodes-Small pointed out that since they changed the number of Council Members, the next revision would be in 2030 but the new Council Members would take their seats in 2027 and they would not have enough time to see if it was worthwhile. Discussion followed.

**** THE MOTION TO RETAIN THE ORIGINAL FIVE YEAR MANDATORY CHARTER REVISION LANGUAGE PASSED WITH FIVE (5) IN FAVOR (BENNETT, CLARK, DICKENS, LEVIN AND MCQUAID), TWO OPPOSED (CAMACHO AND HEMPSTEAD) AND ONE ABSTENTION (FAIRBAIRN). [1:06:49]**

Mr. Dickens asked if the City solicited people who are willing to be part of a Commission like this. Discussion followed about potential means of recruitment. Atty. Mednick noted that there were ways to develop robust language to include people of various background, geographic locations, gender, backgrounds and ethnicity among others.

**** Mr. LEVIN MOVED TO ADOPT MPR LANGUAGE FOR THE FIVE AT LARGE COUNCIL SEATS THAT WOULD DESIGNATE TWO OF THE FIVE AT LARGE SEATS FOR MINORITY PARTY REPRESENTATION.**

Mr. Levin noted that he had mentioned the 2023 municipal election and noted that the same figures appeared in the 2019 municipal election for the At Large seats. He said that the Democratic candidates received 57% of the votes, but were awarded 100% of the seats. He said that MPR is not perfect but would address the concern that so many residents had spoken about.

**** THE MOTION TO ADOPT MPR LANGUAGE FOR THE FIVE AT LARGE COUNCIL SEATS THAT WOULD DESIGNATE TWO OF THE FIVE AT LARGE SEATS FOR MINORITY PARTY REPRESENTATION FAILED TO PASS WITH THREE (3) IN FAVOR (BENNETT, CLARK, LEVIN), FIVE (5) OPPOSED (CAMACHO, DICKENS, HEMPSTEAD, FAIRBAIRN, AND RHODES-SMALL) AND ONE (1) ABSTENTION (MCQUAID). [1:16:16]**

Mr. Fairbairn said that the last item to discuss was the four year term. He asked if there was a motion to increase the terms of the Mayor and Council to four years.

**** MR. CLARK MOVED TO INCREASE THE MAYOR'S TERM TO FOUR YEARS.**

Mr. Levin said that there were a number of ways to do this. He suggested that this item be broken out as a separate question on the ballot. Mr. Clark said that this would be one of the best times to do it since the current Mayor was not running on the ballot. Discussion followed.

Mr. Dickens pointed out that the previous Commission had presented this to the Council and the Council moved it back to a two year term. He said that these changes have to go to the electorate to be approved and the last set of changes were approved by 85% of the voters. If the Mayor's term had been on it, the changes would not have passed. Discussion followed including having the new four term start in 2029.

Atty. Camacho said that having a four year term for Mayor with the Council Members only have two year terms would weaken the Council. He suggested they consider a four year term for Council Members and have them as separate questions on the ballot. He suggested that the main work that the Commission had done would be one question, followed by a second question about changing the Mayor's term to four years and have the four year term for the Common Council as a third question. This would allow the voters to decide. [1:27:10]

Atty. Mednick reminded everyone that the bi-election would see low voter turnout and he spoke about the Board of Education. Atty. Mednick had several suggestions about how they could time the elections to balance off a four year term Mayor.

Mr. McQuaid commented that they were just making recommendations to the Council and ultimately, it would be the voters that decide.

Atty. Camacho said that his amendment would be have four year staggered terms for the Common Council Members. That would give the voters a check and balance every two years.

Mr. Fairbairn said that the Mayor should be a stand-alone thing and then Council should be a stand alone item. Discussion followed.

**** THE MOTION TO INCREASE THE MAYOR'S TERM TO FOUR YEARS PASSED WITH SEVEN (7) IN FAVOR (CAMACHO, CLARK, DICKENS, FAIRBAIRN, LEVIN, MCQUAID AND RHODES-SMALL) AND TWO (2) OPPOSED (BENNETT AND HEMPSTEAD).**

Mr. Clark asked if there was robust discussion about this issue during the last Commission. Mr. Fairbairn and Mr. Dickens confirmed that there was and Mr. Dickens noted that there was also a discussion with council as well.

Atty. Camacho added that they should also consider a four year term for the Town Clerk. He said that the Town Clerk should not be the only official running every two years. Discussion followed.

**** ATTY. CAMACHO MOVED TO INCLUDE THE TOWN CLERK IN THAT WITH A FOUR YEAR TERM STARTING IN 2030 FOR A STAGGERED TERM. [1:37:36]**

A discussion followed regarding whether the Commission should consider the terms of those who serve on the boards and committees.

Atty. Camacho said that he wished to include the statement that Norwalk is a city of 100,000 people and having to run every two years is expensive. Norwalk is a big city rather than a small town and needs to have four year terms. Discussion followed about timing the election cycles.

Mr. Clark said that this was a substantial change to the Charter and he asked Atty. Mednick about how four year terms have worked out for other cities. Atty. Mednick said that Hartford had four year terms for a number of years, as has Middletown. Hamden has a four year Mayor and two year Council set up. He noted that Norwalk had experienced a number of turn overs with the Council seats and asked if they felt they could recruit the proper number of candidate to fill the slates and remain in the seats for four years. He reminded everyone that the Council had considered this issue because he held some workshops between the two Commissions. The general trends is towards four year terms. The Commission will present the suggestions and they the Council will eliminate what they want to bring forward to the voters.

**** THE MOTION TO HAVE A FOUR YEAR COUNCIL TERM BEGINNING IN 2031 PASSED WITH FOUR (4) IN FAVOR (CAMACHO, CLARK, DICKENS AND RHODES-SMALL); THREE (3) OPPOSED (BENNETT, FAIRBAIRN AND HEMPSTEAD) AND TWO (2) ABSTENTIONS (LEVIN AND MCQUAID). [1:52:44]**

Mr. Fairbairn noted that they still had to vote on moving the Town Clerk to a four year term starting in 2029.

Mr. Levin said that while Norwalk's Town Clerk is popular, there are at least two dozen towns in Connecticut that appoint the Town Clerk rather than having an elected position. Some of the positions like constable or poet laureate would do fine as an appointed positions.

Mr. Clark said that the Commission had not really discussed this in depth. Atty. Mednick said that the smaller towns were moving in this direction. Atty. Mednick gave a brief overview of the other large cities in Connecticut.

Mr. Dickens said as a former party chairman, he did not want to have the Town Clerk to be appointed.

**** THE MOTION TO HAVE A FOUR YEAR TERM FOR THE TOWN CLERK STARTING IN 2029 PASSED WITH SIX (6) IN FAVOR (BENNETT, CAMACHO, CLARK, DICKENS, FAIRBAIRN AND RHODES-SMALL); ONE (1) OPPOSED (HEMPSTEAD) AND TWO ABSTENTIONS (LEVIN AND MCQUAID). [1:57:00]**

V. ACTION ITEM

A. Vote on Draft Report to be Transmitted to the Common Council

Mr. Fairbairn said that he would be in touch with Atty. Mednick about the changes in the draft report. Mr. Clark said that there were some scrivener errors, such as the word inflammable which should be changed to flammable. The Latin term “de novo” is in the Charter and Mr. Clark respectfully requested that the definition be included along with any other Latin terms. He suggested a simple summary before each section. Mr. Fairbairn agreed and said that he agreed and it would be in the transmittal letter.

Mr. Levin said that there were recommendations made for extending both the Mayor’s term and the Council Members’ terms. He would like to include in that recommendation that both be included as separate referendum items. [1:59:43]

Atty. Mednick said that the Commission was not at that stage yet. He said that the Council will be sending it back to the Commission. Atty. Mednick said that the recommendations could actually be accepted by the Council for a final report and they could approve it. Discussion followed.

**** MR. LEVIN MOVED TO REQUEST THAT THE TRANSMITTAL LETTER INCLUDE LANGUAGE STATING THAT THE THREE ITEMS RECOMMENDING EXTENDED TERMS BE PLACED ON AS SEPARATE BALLOT ITEMS.**

Mr. Clark asked Atty. Mednick if there are recommendations about breaking items out into separate ballot questions. Atty. Mednick said it is usually handled during the later stage of the process. He said that he had spoken with some Council Members and there were items in the recommendations that would not likely be approved. Usually this is handled during the negotiations for the final package. He said that he had seen some transmittal letters suggesting that there are items that should be presented on the ballot separately.

Mr. Clark said that he would be voting against this.

**** THE MOTION TO APPROVE THE REQUEST THAT THE TRANSMITTAL LETTER INCLUDE LANGUAGE STATING THAT THE THREE ITEMS RECOMMENDING EXTENDED TERMS BE PLACED ON AS SEPARATE BALLOT ITEMS FAILED TO PASS WITH ONE (1) IN FAVOR (LEVIN), SIX (6) OPPOSED (BENNETT, CLARK, DICKENS, FAIRBAIRN, HEMPSTEAD, MCQUAID AND RHODES-SMALL) AND ONE (1) ABSTENTION (CAMACHO).**

The next meeting will be with the Council on Wednesday, June 4th at 6:00 p.m.

**** MR. FAIRBAIRN MOVED TO APPROVE THE DRAFT REPORT OF THE CHARTER BE INCLUSIVE OF THE CHANGES THAT WERE APPROVED AT THIS MEETING.**

**** THE MOTION PASSED UNANIMOUSLY.**

VI. ADJOURNMENT

**** MR. CLARK MOVED TO ADJOURN.
** THE MOTION PASSED UNANIMOUSLY.**

The meeting adjourned at