

COMMON COUNCIL CHAMBERS
AND VIA TELECONFERENCE

I. CALL TO ORDER

Council President Smyth called the meeting to order at 6:01 p.m. and led the Assembly in reciting the Pledge of Allegiance.

Ms. Dixon, Atty. Mednick and Atty. Coppola were also in attendance.

II. ROLL CALL

Ms. Dixon called the Roll as follows:

Council at Large:	Mr. Gregory Burnett	Mr. Joshua Goldstein
	Mr. Johan Lopez	Ms. Nora Niedzielski-Eichner
	Ms. Barbara Smyth	
District A:	Mr. Jalin Sead	<i>Ms. Nicol Ayers</i>
District B:	<i>Mr. Dajuan Wiggins</i>	<i>Ms. Darlene Young</i>
District C:	Ms. Nicole Eaddy	Ms. Anne Wennerstrand
District D:	Ms. Heather Dunn	<i>Mr. Douglas W. Sutton</i>
District E:	<i>Mr. James Frayer</i>	<i>Ms. Lisa Shanahan</i>

There were nine (9) in attendance. A quorum was present.

III. PUBLIC PARTICIPATION

Ms. Lisa Brinton, of Shorefront Park and the Independent Party Chair, came forward and said that to the general public understanding government was boring and often misunderstood as was the Charter Revision. In addition to not understanding how the local government operates, the average voters don't realize that there is no check and balance, accountability or representation for 45% of the City. She noted that Ms. Dunn was on the Council and representing a lot of residents, but she is only one person.

Ms. Brinton said that the proposed budget along with the double digit tax increases has the attention of the voters now. The financial crisis sits with the party in charge. The over reliance on property taxes, unsustainable zoning and educational policies as well as the ECS formula have converged. The crisis isn't going away and the majority party owns it. They can see the negative consequences of single party Republican rule at the national level, but it was no better with the Democrats. The same gaslighting and bullying behavior of ramming policies through Committees plays out in Norwalk.

Since 2016, the public has asked three Charter Commissions for greater checks and balances and Minority Representation. Three Democratic controlled Commissions have refused despite acknowledging Norwalk's outlier status compared to the other 168 towns across the State. This is not a Republican issue because today 58% of the voters are unaffiliated or Independent.

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Connecticut's Minority Representation Law states that no more than a specified number of members, generally 2/3rds of the total enrolled in the same political party can serve on a particular body whether it is elected or appointed. Norwalk's five District structure creates a loophole which has been exploited to deny representation. This appears to be more than just wanting a simple majority, but an attempt to control it all. This is very Trump like.

Connecticut has closed primaries, no term limits, restricted ballot access for third parties and low turnout for local elections. The Citizens Election program provides clean public financing to candidates for statewide office does not apply to the Mayor. Special interest money from developers, lawyers and lobbyist dominates those campaigns.

Getting residents to vote no on this latest Charter Revision will be an easy sell after a decade of undertaxed developments, overcrowded streets and the latest school budget crisis. Finances are not going to improve next year or the year after that. Why would voters approve a four year term when a two year term is the only check and balance that the voters have. Thank you.

Mr. Fred Wilms of Westview Lane greeted the Council. He said that he was the Chair of the Republican Town Committee. In the last Charter revision, the RTC did provide support for that and it was a bipartisan Charter revision that passed overwhelmingly. This one seems to be less so.

The biggest ask that the RTC had was for Minority Representation, which Ms. Brinton just spoke about. Two years ago, the Republican Mayoral Candidate got 45% of the vote but unfortunately, for the 45% of the voters, there is only one person, Ms. Dunn, who is an Independent is on the Republican line between the Council and the Board of Education. He said that the RTC believes that there is a very strong imbalance there. The vast majority of the towns and cities in Connecticut address that issue is through Minority Party Representation. Norwalk is one of the very few that don't have that at the Council and Board of Education level. The RTC requested that it be implemented at least at the Board of Education level. The Minority Representation is already being utilized with the Boards and Commissions in town, so the absence of that for the Council and BOE is a negative development. Mr. Wilms said that they hoped that this would be reconsidered.

Another negative development are the four year terms in relation to the checks and balances. Four year terms cut against that. In 20216, four year terms were proposed as a Charter revision and soundly defeated. He said that he was not sure where that issue stood this time.

The Commission recommended expanding the Council to 20 members and the RTC supports that. It will provide more people, resources and more chances for candidates.

Mr. Wilms said that in conclusion, public approvals are needed for anything that the Council approves for the Charter. The RTC will be monitoring the final results and react accordingly. Thank you.

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Ms. Diane Cece said that she was disappointed that the public was not given a more comprehensive summary as to what was being proposed for changes. She added that there was no consideration for Minority Party Representation this time around.

She said she was in favor of a four year term for a Mayor, but with term limit. "People who are in power will do very little for the people who put them there." She said that she would be opposing it.

Ms. Lisa Henderson of Appletree Lane greeted the Council and was disappointed that the Commission did not take Minority Party Representation more seriously. She hope that the Council would take it more seriously and send it back.

Ms. Jo Bennett of the Charter Commission greeted everyone and said that there had been discussion about having five year cycles vs ten year cycles for Charter Revision. She said that the Commission had recommended the ten year cycle.

Ms. Smyth asked if there was anyone else on line who wished to speak.

Mr. Levin of the Charter Commission said that he had sent a letter to the Council Members and reminded everyone that they have the option of breaking the various items into separate questions to be addressed separately by the voters rather than bundling the entire thing together.

Ms. Smyth asked if there was anyone else on line who wished to speak. Hearing none, she closed the Public Comment section at this time.

IV. REVIEW PROPOSED CHARTER REVISION

A. Proposed Charter Revision Redline Version

Ms. Smyth said that they had a full presentation from the Charter Commission. Ms. Niedzielski-Eichner noted that Chapter II was mostly clarification on definitions.

Ms. Smyth then opened Chapter III for discussion.

Mr. Burnett asked why there were 20 members rather than an odd number. Atty. Mednick said that it was basically a simple increase of each District from two members to three members. He noted that the U.S. Senate has 100 Senators.

Ms. Smyth said that this was just a workshop and they would not be voting on anything at this meeting.

Mr. Burnett expressed concerns about increasing the cost to the City by increasing the number of Council Members and their stipends.

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Mr. Burnett said that they would be adding an expense to the City by adding more five positions. Mr. Lopez said that he felt this was just a way to circumvent the electoral process.

Ms. Wennerstrand was concerns about the additional cost of more Council Members. She asked if it would change anything related to redistricting. Atty. Mednick said that the Districts are still within the Federal guidelines.

Mr. Sead said that he did not see the point in expanding it because of the workload. He felt that it would not accomplish anything and did not address Minority Party Representation.

Mr. Goldstein reminded everyone that Norwalk's population has grown and he felt that two people could not represent their Districts adequately.

Ms. Dunn said that the Council Members get \$50.00 a month, which is \$600.00 a year. She said that the cost of expanding the Council chambers was not worth discussing. She said that even if they had Minority Party Representation, the Democrats would still have the majority. She is on the Council as the sole non-Democrat. When she was running, she had to go to the Republicans and ask for their support even though she isn't a Republican. While the Democrats have a majority, that still leaves a major portion of the residents not represented. There are many unaffiliated and Independent voters aren't being heard. She mentioned both Doug Hempstead and Rick McQuaid who crossed party lines to retain their positions. Discussion followed.

Ms. Dunn said that during the discussions someone had remarked that since the Minority Party Representative don't represent diversity and inclusion, they don't deserve a seat at the table. No one objected to this statement. Ms. Dunn reminded everyone that she was the Minority Party Representative and felt this was wrong.

Mr. Lopez said that running a strong campaign was the key and he felt that just giving a seat to someone was wrong. Atty. Mednick said that this was not for MPR, but simply allowing more candidates to run. The candidates with the majority of the votes would occupy the seats.

Ms. Smyth said that they would be meeting again on the 18th and would try to get them to move the following meeting back by a half hour.

Ms. Niedzielski-Eichner said that she was intrigued by the set-up of the Council terms, which would be offset from the Mayor's terms. Atty. Mednick said that this was correct. She asked for clarification on the Board of Education terms, which Atty. Mednick reviewed with her.

Atty. Mednick gave a brief overview and said it would give the residents the ability to hold the Mayor accountable and give the residents more time to consider candidates. She said that the increased independence of this body is her number one priority and she appreciated the way it was presented. Discussion followed about the Council election scheduling and other towns that have retained alternate cycles. When the Mayor is not at the top of the ticket, there is a lower turn out. The off cycle gives the voters some accountability towards

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Ms. Smyth said that they could discuss the Mayor's term. She recused herself at 6:47 p.m. Mr. Goldstein assumed the Chairmanship.

Mr. Lopez noted that it would allow the Mayor to work on long term projects. Atty. Mednick said that Hartford has a four year term for Mayor and their Council. In Waterbury, they went to a District system and have not had a problem recruit candidates.

Mr. Lopez said that with a two year Mayoral term, there is a problem recruiting staff since they could lose their job after two years. Ms. Niedzielski-Eichner said that she had raised this issue in other discussions.

Ms. Niedzielski-Eichner said that she would like to see the two year/four year terms enacted. Mr. Sead pointed out that while the Council could approve something, the final vote is from the people. The Council Members need to read the room and see where people are coming from.

Mr. Burnett then asked about uncoupling the items and whether it was possible. Atty. Mednick said that he would normally recommend an omnibus questions and separate out the controversial items. Other communities have decided to package it all together and rolled the dice. He was surprised that Waterbury and New Haven won using this method.

Mr. Goldstein said that it was paramount about trying to recruit top talent and the two year term is less attractive than a four year term. He said that the way he saw it was to uncouple the questions so the resident could decide.

Mr. Burnett said this may not be the right time or climate for the question to come forward, but eventually it will be presented to the voters. They should move the item forward and see where it lands.

Ms. Dunn said that Minority Representation was important and linking it to a four term right now would be questionable since people are scared. If they had a four year term, the Minority Representation issue would be more palatable. Discussion followed.

Ms. Niedzielski-Eichner said that the budgetary authority does not sit with the Council and the fundamental issue

V. ADJOURNMENT

**** MR. BURNETT MOVED TO ADJOURN.**

**** MOTION PASSED UNANIMOUSLY.**

The meeting was unanimously adjourned at 7:02 p.m.

ATTEST: _____
Irene Dixon, City Clerk