

**CITY OF NORWALK  
CHARTER COMMISSION  
PUBLIC HEARING  
OCTOBER 26, 2022**

**ATTENDANCE:** Richard McQuaid, Vice Chair; Carl Dickens, Tyler Fairbairn, Michael Witherspoon, Patsy Brescia, Chair (6:20 p.m.)

**STAFF:** Atty. Steven Mednick, consultant

**OTHERS:** Nicol Ayers, Common Council; Godfrey Azima, BOE Secretary; Ed Camacho, BET; Diane Carpio, BOE Vice Chair; Joshua Goldstein, Common Council; Colin Hostin, BOE Chair; Troy Jellerette, BET; Diana Lauricella, John Levin, Thomas Livingston, Council President, Larry Manzi, Sheri McCready Brown, BOE; Jenn McMurrer, Common Council; Nora Niedzielski-Eichner, Common Council; Jordan Schantz, Assistant City Clerk/Legislative Assistant; Barbara Smyth, Common Council; Janine Wilkes Randolph, BOE

This hybrid meeting was held via Zoom and in person.

**I. CALL TO ORDER**

Mr. McQuaid, the Vice Chair, called the meeting to order at 6:12 p.m. He requested everyone to introduce themselves.

**II. ROLL CALL**

A quorum was present.

**APPROVAL OF THE MINUTES.**

• **September 21, 2022**

**\*\* Mr. DICKENS MOVED TO APPROVE THE MINUTES OF THE SEPTEMBER 21, 2022 MEETING.**

**\*\* MR. WITHERSPOON SECONDED.**

**\*\* THE MOTION TO APPROVE THE MINUTES OF THE SEPTEMBER 21, 2022 MEETING AS SUBMITTED PASSED UNANIMOUSLY.**

**PUBLIC HEARING**

**MEETING WITH ELECTED AND APPOINTED OFFICIALS:**

**(A) MAYOR, MEMBERS OF THE COUNCIL, BOARD OF EDUCATION,  
BOARD OF ESTIMATE AND OTHER BOARDS AND COMMISSIONS;**

**(B) OTHER ELECTED OFFICIALS AND FORMER ELECTED OFFICIALS OR  
REPRESENTATIVES OF THE TOWN; AND**

**(C) CORPORATION COUNSEL PERTAINING TO CHALLENGING  
PROVISIONS OF THE CHARTER.**

Mr. John Levin of 249 Chestnut Hill Road came forward. He said that the town, the Commission and the Charter were in very good hand with Atty. Mednick.

He recommended that the Police Commission be expanded to a total of five (5) with two appointments independent of the Mayor.

He said that the charter was created a long time ago and thought that the Commission should have some fun. He suggested creation of a royal family and the revitalization of a town crier. He also suggested an Arbiter of Stupid Shit, which would be known as the ASS. He also suggested an air raid warden, a dungeon, and a village idiot (for which Mr. Levin immediately volunteered) among others.

Mr. McQuaid said that at NHS, they had created a royal family and would tell Mr. Levin how it worked out offline.

Mr. Thomas Livingston, the Council President came forward and said that he would like to give a few broad thoughts about the process. He said that the Charter was created in 1913 and evolved over the years. He said that the Charter needs to mirror the current functioning of the City but have enough flexibility to allow the City business to be done. He suggested that they remove financial limits, but take measure to make the finances are efficiently used. He spoke about the fact that they would

The Charter needs to be accessible and understandable for the future. This revision is long overdue and the Commission have to create a mechanism to update the Charter as needed.

Mr. McQuaid announced that the Mayor was not able to attend the meeting due to not feeling well. He added that Ms. Brescia was now present.

Ms. Brescia assumed the chairmanship and noted that in the September minutes, Ms. Wasunna should have been listed as a member of the Commission.

Ms. Barbara Smyth came forward and said that she was the Council Majority Leader and concurred with everything Mr. Livingston said.

She said that she would like to see some reasonable compensation for the Council Members and for the BOE members as well. Both positions require a lot of work. It would allow for more diversity on the Council, such as individuals with young children and need childcare.

Ms. Smyth said that she would like them to review some of the job descriptions for the City staff. She said that she viewed this as an ongoing process.

Ms. Niedzielski-Eichner, a member of the Common Council, came forward and said that she appreciated all the members of the Charter Revision Commission. The most important thing here is the modernization of the Charter. Atty. Mednick has presented an excellent framework. She encouraged them to remove the job descriptions and allow the administration enough room to operate.

Ms. Niedzielski-Eichner said that they should try to imagine these roles in the 21st century. They need to balance the various functions, particularly the administrative and legislative. Having a mayor with 40 years of public service has been very good. They are very limited with the City's financials, which does not allow the Council to bring forward their constituents concerns since they only set the cap on the budget.

She said that the Council should be able to hire their own financial staff.

Ms. Niedzielski-Eichner said that it would be important to support Mr. Levin's suggesting about the Police Commission.

Ms. Niedzielski-Eichner said that there were a number of large structural concerns and wanted to acknowledge those concerns, even if they are not able to address all of them. All the concerns are valid.

Ms. Brescia asked if there was a list of the concerns that could be submitted. Ms. Niedzielski-Eichner said that there were concerns about having a manager with the Council and concerns about whether they need a Board of Estimate and Taxation among others.

Ms. Jenn McMurrer, a member of the Common Council, came forward and said that there had been some question about equity and the BOE. The BOE members do not receive any stipend and the Council Members receive about \$46.00 a month. She said that it would allow for more diversity on the Council, such as individuals with young children and need childcare.

Ms. McMurrer said that the BOE members serve a 4 year term while the Council Members have 2 year terms.

Mr. Josh Goldstein a Council Member came forward and said that they have been debating whether Norwalk was a town or city. Now that they are almost at a population of 100,000, they are definitely a City and need a charter that can be read and understood by the residents. The government is for and by the people. He echoed his colleague's concerns about the Police Commission, which is a small but warranted step. He said that they need to consider the structural concerns. There are other controversial issues that the Commission should be aware of and consider them. He said that they will not be able to get everything completed in one Charter review and was deeply appreciative of the Commissioners' service.

Mr. Goldstein said that he agreed with the earlier suggestion about the Council hiring their own staff.

Mr. Goldstein said that he was fortunate to be a 32 year old white, single male with a full time job. There are others who would like to serve but do not have enough financial resources to cover childcare. The Council needs the residents to provide different perspectives. This is not self-serving, but investing in the future.

Ms. Ayers said she would like to thank the Commission and that her colleagues have already covered many of the points she would like to say. It is important to make sure people can understand the Charter.

She said that it was important to realize that the Council does not have the ability to hire staff. There is many things that the Council Members would like to do, but not having a staff member slows them down. Having the ability to hire someone who will help them govern will be a major issue as a City.

She said that she was a single mother of two children, but is fortunate to have family support to provide childcare. She said that she feels that she is a trailblazer for others who will come behind. This becomes a social justice issue and a human rights issue. She asked how they were expected to do this work with these types of barriers. The current document does not allow them to be equal because it separates men and women and those with children and those who do not have children. This is not representative government and does not allow people to display themselves to their best advantage. The \$46.00 a month does not cover an hour or even 30 minutes of child care or even the gas. This should be changed for the Board of Education, also because they face the same Council Members do.

Ms. Lauricella of Little Fox Lane said she appreciated many of the topics discussed by the Council Members. She said Atty. Mednick will assist with the organizational segment, she said that she was unsure if the public would be voting on the Charter revisions. She said that the Council had a chance to change the Charter five years ago, she felt that the narrow concentration was ill advised. She cautioned the Commissioners to look at the administrative issues.

She requested that they consider creating a Citizens Police Advisory Commission. It is very controversial. The citizens have a need to deal with issues when they encounter the officers. She noted that there were many cities across the nation that have them and they work well when they are written up well.

Ms. Lauricella said that the pay should be increased and make the case to the public in order to get it approved. The previous Charter Commission did not provide a good educational basis and the Charter was not approved by the public.

It is very difficult for the public to have access to the Board of Estimate and Taxation. Allowing the public to view the current code and charter is very difficult. She requested that the current code and charter be easily linked and provided in English, Spanish and Haitian.

Atty. Mednick reminded everyone that any action taken by the Commission would need to be approved by the Council and then subject to approval by the public.

Mr. Colin Hostin, of Dock Road, said that he appreciated this process. He said that his colleagues made good points about equity of service.

Mr. Hostin said that he had a concern about the budget, the bulk of which is to fund the public schools. The current timeline process is flawed. Every year they encounter the same issues about the school funding, so there are many different levels. This particular process may not be the time to go to Level 10, but encouraged the Commissioners to consider how this process could be streamlined and improved.

Mr. Jellerette of the BET said that he would like to echo the earlier comments. He said that Norwalk is now in the top five cities in the State and suggested that they take a look at best practices. He said that the issue of Taxing Districts was confusing. The current budget seems very cumbersome. He thanked the Commissioners for their work and looked forward to seeing their finished product.

Mr. Camacho, the BET chair, said he would like to address the issue of having a City manager and eliminating the BET. He said that he felt this would be ill advised and that the BET is part of a checks and balance structure. The BET members are nominated by the City Council and the Charter requires the BET members to be politically diverse.

Ms. Brescia asked if there was anyone else who wished to address the Commission at this time. No one else indicated that they wished to address the Commission.

**\*\* MR. DICKENS MOVED TO CLOSE THE PUBLIC HEARING PORTION OF THE MEETING.**

**\*\* MR. WITHERSPOON SECONDED.**

Ms. Brescia apologized for her tardiness.

**\*\* THE MOTION TO CLOSE THE PUBLIC HEARING PORTION OF THE MEETING PASSED UNANIMOUSLY.**

Mr. Dickens said that he had spoken with numerous individuals about the Charter Revisions and many people were unclear about the 2016 revisions. He said that there were many suggestions that he had made like term limits, but had been told that they could not do them because they were handled at the State level. Even though he lived in Norwalk for 20 years, he had not been aware of what happened in 2016.

Atty. Mednick said he would be reviewing the 2016 revision attempt to see the issues, but that it was clear to him that the Council was concerned about the organizational structure of the document. It will be important to have a strong and good Charter, one that is readable and usable. However, the City can only engage in activities in which they have express authority from the State of Connecticut. Atty. Mednick said that he would provide the Commission members with a list of items that local governments can be engaged in. Term limits and recall will not be on that listing. It will also be important to insure they do not eliminate any previous Special Act provisions to avoid giving up any power that is unique to Norwalk.

Atty. Mednick said there may be things in the Charter, like City positions, or restrictive job descriptions that need to be reviewed. He said that his general recommendation was to move some of these items into the Code of Ordinances. The Charter establishes the constitutional standing. The Charter can establish the position such as the Police Chief or Public Works Director. The Charter also establishes a best practice standard. By moving the job description to the Code, it can allow the Council to review the job description every five years or when someone vacates the position.

The discussion moved to the definition of “term limits”, which would limit the number of terms that an individual could serve.

Ms. Brescia noted that Atty. Mednick had done this with numerous other towns in Connecticut. Atty. Mednick explained that he would be bringing other examples of towns that were comparable to Norwalk so they could understand what they do and do not have. This will allow the Commissioners to make an informed decision.

Atty. Mednick said that at the next meeting, which would start at 6:30, they would be hearing from Evergreen Consultants and what the Corporation Counsel Office concerns would be.

Mr. Dickens asked where the Evergreen study was and if there was an Executive Summary available. He said that he did not have a list of anything that was followed up on by the Council. Atty. Mednick said that he would check with the Council President.

Atty. Mednick said that he was aware that the public often doesn't understand this process since it is not done frequently. He encouraged the public to send their cards and letters in with their concerns. The Holidays are just around the corner and there is some heavy drafting to do. There will be panel discussions. He usually encourages the local people, like the Finance Director present when they are working on the financial section. By the third meeting, they should have some type of framework. He suggested that they consider the Charter in terms of the chapters, but said that they did not have to do it sequentially.

Ms. Brescia said that she hope the Commission members had been reading through the Charter and compiling a number of questions and concerns.

The next meeting will be held on the first and third Wednesdays of the month, starting with November 2nd.

### **ADJOURNMENT**

**\*\* MR. DICKENS MOVED TO ADJOURN.**

**\*\* MR. WITHERSPOON SECONDED.**

**\*\* THE MOTION PASSED UNANIMOUSLY.**

The meeting adjourned at 7:23 p.m.

Respectfully submitted,

S. L. Soltes

Telesco Secretarial Services