

**CITY OF NORWALK
CHARTER REVISION COMMISSION
PUBLIC HEARING
FEBRUARY 10, 2016**

ATTENDANCE: William Fitzgerald, Chairman; Jerry Petrini, Stephen Keogh, Yvonne Rodriguez, Michael Witherspoon, Mary Roman, Glenn Iannaccone

STAFF: Mario Coppola, Corporation Counsel

OTHERS: Steve Serasis, Bill Collins, Michael Genke, Stuart Wells, Elsa Obuchowski, Linda Berkoff, Adolph Nederland, Gloria Nederland, Lisa Thompson, Robert Hard, Michael Dunn, Diane Lauricella, Nora King, James Kahn, Angela Harrison, Virginia Guimond, Doug Hempstead, Mike Barbis, Lee Grant, Haroldo Williams and Brad Schmidt

ROLL CALL

The public hearing was called to order at 6:33 p.m. by Mr. Fitzgerald.

Mr. Fitzgerald introduced the Commission members to the public. The Common Council adopted a resolution to consider the following 6 proposed changes to the Charter.

- 1) To extend the Mayoral term from 2 to 4 years.
- 2) Investigate the possibility of extending the term of council members, town clerk and other city officials to 4 years.
- 3) If the Mayoral term is extended to 4 years then look at term limits.
- 4) Investigate the possibility of adjusting Board of Education elections to correspond with any changes.
- 5) Eliminate the reference to Selectman, City Treasurer and Sheriff from the city charter.
- 6) Investigate the possibility of having the council member compensation set by the Board of Estimate and Taxation.

The Commission has been directed to complete its draft report no later than April 5, 2016. Mr. Fitzgerald said it is up to the voting population to make the final decision.

Mr. Steve Serasis of 24 Heights Street was the first speaker. Mr. Serasis said 30 to 40 percent of all vehicles that use Parks and Recreation resources are not registered in Norwalk. He proposed for renters and homeowners the vehicle must be in the resident's name and registered in Norwalk. For property owners, if you do not live in Norwalk you will be given two resident passes, along with registration they must bring in your current Norwalk tax bill. For dealer or repair plates, driver and vehicle must be from the city of Norwalk and present registration along with two current utility bills in the resident's name and a letter from the business stating they you are the sole driver of this vehicle.

Mr. Bill Collins stepped to the podium next. He discussed the issue of term limits. Mr. Collins said citizens are sometimes unaware of the improvements made by a Mayor and are more influenced by taxes going up or down.

Mr. Collins said term limits would be a mistake. He said the voter has the option to vote him or her out.

Mr. Fitzgerald asked how he would feel about a 3-term limit. Mr. Collins cited the success of Charleston Mayor Joe Reilly who just retired after 24 years. He said Charleston would have been worse off if it had term limits.

Mr. Mike Genke of 39 Elmwood Avenue spoke next. Mr. Genke said he supported a 4-year term for a Council At-Large position.

He added maybe the council compensation should be influenced by the Mayor's compensation. He suggested take the Mayor's salary and divide by 15 to arrive at the council member's compensation. He said they would also take away the chance of it being politicized.

Mr. Stuart Wells of 244 West Norwalk Road was the next speaker. Mr. Wells is a member of the Board of Elections. He said removing the lesser offices will shorten the ballot, but it would not become a single-sided ballot unless Constable is take off the ballot too.

He said he does not support having the Mayor, Council and Board of Education every four years. He said during Municipal Elections he said they have to phase in new equipment and train workers. Mr. Wells said a low turnout election is not a good idea.

Mr. Fitzgerald asked if Constable, Sheriff and Selectman were removed from the ballot would there would be some savings. Mr. Wells said there would be some savings, but it would not be major.

Ms. Elisa Peterson Obuchowski of 41 East Avenue had a proposal about non-sexist language in the Charter. She suggested changing references from Councilmen to Councilmember and from Councilmanic Districts to Council Districts. She said its time for Norwalk to enter the 21st century and get rid of sexist language.

She stated she has concerns about Planning and Zoning and submitted a letter to the Corporation Counsel. Ms. Obuchowski said P&Z is not doing its job to make Norwalk a livable, attractive place to be.

Ms. Obuchowski also said she would keep the term for Mayor and Council Members two years.

Ms. Linda Berkoff of 4 South Main Street was the next speaker. Ms. Berkoff supported 4 year terms and possibly a limit of 12 years in total. She said it takes a year for the Mayor to get a plan in place before its time to run for another election.

She said it is difficult to get people to vote. She said she does not know what can be done to get people more involved in elections.

Mr. Adolph Nederland of 1 Green Hill Road was the next speaker. He said he supports the city hiring a City Planner. He said the city schools are overcrowded. Mr. Nederland said Planning and Zoning is not doing its job and the Charter Revision should look into adding a City Planner.

Ms. Gloria Nederland of 1 Green Hill Road supported a 2-year term for district elections and for Mayor and a 4 year term for Common Council.

Ms. Nederland said with all the construction going on she is concerned about the sewer system.

Ms. Lisa Thompson of 24 Highland Avenue was the next speaker. Ms. Thompson researched charters of 22 other nearby towns and cities and said only Stamford has a 4 year term for council and only four have 4 year terms for Mayor.

She said she favored a 2-year term for Mayor or if the term were extended then the Mayor should have additional responsibilities. Ms. Thompson also favored Norwalk employing a City Planner.

Ms. Thompson said the Board of Education terms should be staggered. She said most other towns in Connecticut have staggered terms.

Mr. Fitzgerald said if this goes to a vote how would she feel about it. Ms. Thompson said Norwalk does not have a strong Mayoral system. She is worried about accountability if the term is extended to four years.

Mr. Robert Hard of 213 Wolfpit Avenue was the next speaker. Mr. Hart supported a 4 year term for Mayor, but said he does not support term limits. He said its undemocratic

and does not like when a Mayor is a lame duck. He said he is not sure about 4 year terms for council members.

Mr. Hard stated that water rates are unequal. He pointed out if you do not live in the First or Second Taxing District you pay 50 percent more. Mr. Hard said two thirds of the rate payers are out of district.

Mr. Michael Dunn of 18 Kornwall Drive voiced his concerns about term limits. He said a Mayor who cannot run for re-election is not accountable. Mr. Dunn said a Mayor may not work as hard if faced with a term limit.

He said Norwalk residents have never been reluctant about getting rid of Mayors they do not want. Mr. Dunn said he is against all restrictions against people running for office.

Ms. Diane Lauricella asked if people could make written submissions and Mr. Fitzpatrick said to direct submissions to Ms. Barbara Tiscia at the Corporation Counsel.

Ms. Lauricella said she does support a 4-year term but not more than 2 contiguous terms. She said she is not sure about whether or not council members should have 4 year terms. Ms. Lauricella said she is in favor of Board of Estimate setting their compensation.

Ms. Lauricella cited City Charter Chapter 1.189.2. She said the Commission will probably not be able to get to this but it could be looked at after November. She favored adding a Planning Commission and a Redevelopment Commission. She would like to see this studied and this Commission could recommend a new Charter Review Commission be formed.

Ms. Nora King of 17 Hopewood Drive was the next speaker. She said the term for Mayor should be 4 years and limited to 8 years total and Common Council members should be limited to 8 years too.

Ms. King said council members should be paid more. She supported 2 year terms and 4 years for at-large members. Ms. King said Board of Education members should run on staggered terms.

She said we need to clean up Planning and Zoning. Ms. King added we need qualified planners not friends and need to allow unaffiliated people to hold and run for office.

Mr. Fitzgerald said State statute govern the amount of people by party for any committee.

Mr. James Kahn of 12 Union Avenue spoke next. Mr. Kahn said Charter Revision should look at streamlining government and making it more efficient. He said there are more important issues than how long the Mayor's term is. He suggested the Com-

mission should be looking at the City Manager model and the overall effectiveness of the boards and departments.

Ms. Angela Harrison of 7 Sable Street was the next speaker. Ms. Harrison said the term for Mayor should be 2 years.

She said land records in Connecticut are being polluted by banks and attorneys that are filing false documents. Ms. Harrison said somebody has to address this issue and it is already a problem.

Ms. Virginia Guimond of 26 Shortfront Park said she supported a 2 year term for Mayor and the term should be limited to 8 years.

She believes Norwalk should have a City Planner. She said she is upset about what has happened to the schools. Ms. Guimond said her sons left Norwalk so their kids could attend better schools.

Mr. Doug Hempstead was the next speaker. He said the Council does not have any support staff. Mr. Hempstead said the word Councilmen in the Charter should be changed to Councilperson. He said if the change is made to a 4 year term for Mayor he asked if people will vote during off years. He said it is a struggle to get people involved in local elections.

He suggested you could remove Sheriff and add one Constable position.

Mr. Hempstead said he does not support term limits.

Mr. Mike Barbis of 1 Covewood Drive and a member of the Norwalk Board of Education was the next speaker. Mr. Barbis said the taxing districts were created by the state and can only be adjusted by the state legislature.

He supported a 4-year term for council and staggered elections and that will keep turnout up. He stated it is working well for the BOE. He said the District elections for both BOE and Common Council should be held on the off years and Mayor, At-Large members and Town Clerk be held together.

Ms. Lee Grant of 99 Comstock Hill Avenue commented about the City Planner. She said some of Norwalk's problems would not have happened if it had a City Planner. Ms. Grant said with all the development going on it is a necessary position.

Mr. Haroldo Williams of 62 Bayne Street supported a 4 year term for Mayor.

Mr. Fitzgerald thanked everyone for coming and asked the public to not be silent. Mr. Petrini added the Commission has a lot of power. He said we do not want to venture too

far from the directives they were given. He said it takes a simple majority to change the Charter. He encouraged the public to reach out to his or her Councilperson.

Mr. Brad Schmidt 23 North Main Street was the final speaker. He supported a 4-year term for Mayor. He said it takes a year to get things moving and then halfway through the second year the Mayor has to worry about being re-elected.

NEXT MEETING DATE

The next meeting is scheduled for February 22, 2016 at 6:30 p.m. in Room 101.

ADJOURNMENT

**** MR. PETRINI MOVED TO ADJOURN.**

**** MR. IANNACCONE SECONDED.**

**** THE MOTION PASSED UNANIMOUSLY.**

The meeting was adjourned at 8:53 p.m.

Respectfully submitted

G. Venuto
Telesco Secretarial Services