To allow public access, anyone may access a meeting by telephone and/or Zoom, or a recording in the City of Norwalk YouTube channel. Specific instructions and links can be found at norwalkct.gov/meetings.

Members of the public may call in to participate. Callers will not be able to see the meeting participants. All participants will be muted upon entering the meeting. To speak, dial *9 on the phone and you will be called on by the host of the meeting during the public comment section. All speakers must state their name and address. Comments must be on a topic on the agenda, and are limited to three minutes. Anyone disrupting the orderly conduct of the meeting, including by using threatening, hateful, or sexually-explicit language, will be removed. Please find the information using the link above.

Members of the public who wish to provide "live comments" may also use the Zoom meeting platform. All participants will be muted upon entering the meeting. To speak, click the “raise your hand indicator” and you will be called by the host of the meeting during the public comment section. All speakers must state their name and address. Comments must be on a topic on the agenda, and are limited to three minutes. Anyone disrupting the orderly conduct of the meeting, including by using threatening, hateful, or sexually-explicit language, will be removed. Please find the information using the link above.

Members of the public who wish to provide public comment are encouraged to submit those via email in advance of the meeting. For these comments to be included into the record, they must be submitted by 12:00 p.m. the day of the meeting. Please email the City Clerk's office at cityclerk@norwalkct.govwith the subject line “Public Comment” to provide written public comment prior to the meeting.

CITY OF NORWALK
CHARTER REVISION COMMISSION
REGULAR MEETING
FEBRUARY 18, 2025
VIA ZOOM

ATTENDANCE: Tyler Fairbairn, Chair; Jo Bennett; Ed Camacho; James Clark; Carl Dickens; Douglas Hempstead; John Levin

STAFF: Jared Schmitt, Chief Financial Officer

OTHERS: Steve Mednick, Commission Counsel

I. **CALL TO ORDER**

Mr. Fairbairn called the meeting to order at 6:31 p.m.

II. **ROLL CALL**

Mr. Fairbairn called the Roll as indicated above.

III. **PUBLIC PARTICIPATION**

Public participation comments are not verbatim and represent a summarization of statements unless otherwise noted. Speakers are Norwalk residents unless otherwise noted.

[1:10]Ms. Diane Lauricella spoke on the capital budget process and said she has followed both the capital and operating budgets for decades. She suggested the Commission consider that instead of the Planning and Zoning Commission being the only check and balance to shifting line item controls to the Land Use and Building Management Committee and shifting line item control for the operating budget to the Finance and Claims Committee. She wanted to make sure that the public have a public listening session early in the process and asked to have that request memorialized in the Charter she also asked if they could memorialize hiring a full-time Grants Officer reporting to the Finance Department into the Charter. Ms. Lauricella said because there is a gender equity problem with the Board of Estimate and Taxation she asked if there was any way to include gender equity based upon the latest census tract.

[4:45] Mr. Richard Bonenfant apologized for not being in person but the ordinance committee meeting was only on zoom and he would have to run home from this meeting to watch it. He urged the Commission to not consider compensation to those who won't face their constituents in a committee and can vote on items while they are away on vacation. He said they should have to be present and in person to vote. He said a four year term should not be considered in a state where there are no term limits or any avenues to recall. Mr. Bonenfant asked how they would phrase the compensation question on the ballot if the Common Council never meets in person in committees. He said they have lost touch with the people and their constituents.

[6:58]

IV. **PRESENTATION OF THE CAPITAL AND OPERATING BUDGET PROCESS AND DISCUSSION**

Mr. Schmitt shared his screen and presented updates to the operating budget calendar and the capital operating budget followed by a summary of proposed changes to sections 10-11 through 10-23. [36:52]

Mr. Hempstead questioned the wording in section 10-15. Mr. Mednick offered clarification and explained the Mayor submits to the Board of Estimate and Taxation the proposed capital budget and then they act upon the proposed capital budget incorporating recommendations the Mayor, Planning and Zoning Commission and the Chief Financial Officer may make. Mr. Hempstead said there needs to be more clarity on how 10-15 works. He said he always understood it no departments ask for any money in the first column then by the time it gets to the Common Council no one could add a number.

Mr. Camacho asked if the Board of Estimate and Taxation changes the numbers and adds money. Mr. Schmitt said the way 10-15 is written the Board of Estimate and Taxation can approve the capital budget and incorporate changes from the three bodies, but they can't make the changes. Mr. Mednick said the question is what is the meaning of the recommendations after the Mayor proposes a budget. He explained that 10-15a is the approval of the capital budget line items, but they are the Mayor's line items and then the Common Council votes on what stays in the budget. They can't add to it, but they can eliminate items. The Common Council sets the cap and the Mayor makes a recommendation and Planning and Zoning is a review of the Mayor's recommendations.

Mr. Schmitt said his recommendations to the capital budget align with the operating budget in terms of process. The only difference is that Planning and Zoning is involved.

Mr. Levin referencing section 10-17 asked Mr. Schmitt if he could provide an example of recent capital projects that were terminated or abandoned. Mr. Schmitt said he would have to go back and look at what happened last year. Mr. Camacho described a recent project that required more money than they had in the budget. Money was taken out of another project that was either diminished or eliminated and those monies were allocated to the project that did not have enough money.

Mr. Levin said section 10-17 recommends a four year sunset provision and asked how that would work. Mr. Schmitt explained if there was a project that was authorized but did not move forward that would be subject to the sunset provision. If it was already bonded, then the project would not be subject to the sunset provision. If the project was underway, Mr. Schmitt said they would look at the details of each project and create a report for the Board of Estimate and Taxation, Common Council and Planning and Zoning to notify them of the sunsetting status of the project. Mr. Levin suggested adding language to the Charter reflecting this.

Ms. Bennett said that the goal is to have a very equitable representation. She said she is one of two females on this commission and the other female member of the commission is not present this evening and not part of this conversation. She said when they are voting, she feels representation is lacking. She said she does not have a solution, but it should be addressed. Ms.

Bennett said Norwalk is a city of about 100,000 people and there are about 55% female representation and they are not represented well.

Mr. Fairbairn asked where specifically. Ms. Bennett said it is across the board, but regarding this commission. Mr. Fairbairn said they have not voted on anything yet and asked if she was suggesting they not vote until Ms. Rhodes-Small returned. Ms. Bennett said they should wait because they are not being represented well.

Mr. Fairbairn said they could continue this discussion and come up with suggestions for Mr. Mednick to make some draft revision language. He said they are still mid presentation and did not know if they planned to vote this evening.

Mr. Clark asked about section 10-13 limiting hearings. Mr. Schmitt explained when they look at the scope of the Planning and Zoning Commission, they look at compliance with the POCD. They have traditionally held one public hearing.

Mr. Clark asked Mr. Schmitt to create language addressing the statement in some of the sections "needs language to reflect the intent". Mr. Mednick said he was going to talk to Mr. Schmitt to get a sense of where the Commission is going and create the language.

Mr. Hempstead said section 10-23 has always been in existence. Mr. Schmitt said this is an approval that awards the bond sale to a particular firm that won the bid.

Mr. Levin addressed section 10-23 and said there was a reference to considering a minority party representative requirement. He said since the committee would be staffed by the Mayor, Chief Financial Officer, Common Council President, Minority Leader and chairs of the Board of Estimate and Taxation and Finance Claims Committee he said it was not practical if all individuals are of one party or another. The awarding of a bond sale to a winning firm should be apolitical and did not see a need for minority party representation for this application.

Mr. Schmitt reviewed sections 10-1 through 10-8 of the operating budget calendar. Mr. Mednick commented that the budget is completed very early compared to a lot of other large cities. Mr. Schmitt explained there are few companies that process tax bills and completing the budget earlier may make sense so they are not in the middle of other municipalities trying to get their tax bills out.

Mr. Mednick asked if the appropriations in 10-5a were within the maximum limit. Mr. Schmitt said based on how he read it they were within the limit.

Mr. Hempstead addressed the amount of time provided to the members of the Common Council to review and approve the budget. He said the dates need to be widened. Mr. Schmitt said that with the changes he proposed they will have 13 days to vote on the cap. He said he did not believe there was an expectation that the Common Council dig in deep and look at a lot of specific line items. He said in his mind, they would look at how it would impact the tax payers and what were the needs of the Board of Education. He said he did not know if they would be expected to do a deep dive into a lot of details in the budget.

Mr. Schmitt said the members of the Common Council would get the budget on the 15th and have until the 28th . He said given what their task is, which is to vote on the cap they may not need to do a deep dive into each line item like the Board of Estimate and Taxation because they do not have the authority to make changes to each line of the budget.

Mr. Clark suggested asking Mr. Hempstead and other former members of the Common Council to respond. Mr. Hempstead said he took his job on the Common Council very seriously and went through a lot of lines. He said they opened the dialogue with the Board of Education. He said he believed it was his responsibility because he was voting on what the City could spend and they had to operate within the budget. Mr. Schmitt said he made the statement of what might be the rationale. He said he was inferring why he thought it was that way.

Mr. Hempstead suggested giving the budget to the Common Council at their first meeting in February, which would be the second Tuesday of the month.

Mr. Camacho said he did not believe the Common Council meets with department heads the way the Board of Estimate and Taxation does. They can recommend to the Chief Financial Officer increases and reductions, while the Board of Estimate and Taxation can veto certain items and move things around. He said that may account for the amount of time the Board of Estimate and Taxation and the Common Council has. [1:32]

V. **DISCUSSION**

A. Proposed Revisions

Mr. Hempstead said he would like to see three scenarios for minority party representation.

Mr. Levin said he made a request to make changes to the referendum appeal process. He said he knows it was included in the memo he circulated. He said the section discusses the opportunity for citizens to ask for a referendum to appeal any ordinance passed by the Common Council. Said there were several requirements including that 8% of the electors of the City be included in a referendum petition. He said his suggestion was to lower the threshold from 8% to 5% and extending the 25 day limit for collecting signatures. Mr. Camacho said it seems that a lower threshold for any ordinance could be relitigated over and over again. He said there would have to be votes on every ordinance people felt were problematic. He said the Common Council has a process that includes public comment. He said lowering the threshold would be inviting a lot of referendums. Mr. Camacho said if the threshold was lowered, it could become problematic and create an expense to the City. Mr. Levin asked when was the last time a referendum came before the City to appeal an ordinance.

Mr. Dickens shared his concern that there is no communication from the City to the residents about what is going on at City Hall. He said he did not know who was responsible for getting the word out. He said he would welcome thoughts of how to do a better job of communicating to the citizens of Norwalk. Mr. Camacho said when the leaf blower was before the Common Council for a vote, every landscaper was at that meeting. He said it probably depends on the ordinance.

Mr. Hempstead said the last time he recalls a referendum being held regarding an ordinance was in 1988 when the Common Council was splitting Planning and Zoning. He said the threshold was a lot lower and the problem was that you could have a very small group hold up government.

A discussion took place regarding the challenges of getting people to respond to communications.

Mr. Hempstead asked Mr. Melnick if he could find the history and years when the Common Council was at what number. Mr. Mednick said he would have to personally have to look at each Charter in the Town Clerk's office. He said he would talk to Mr. McQuaid to see if anyone at City Hall could look at the Charters.

Mr. Fairbairn said he did not want to vote on anything until everyone was present. Mr. Mednick will work with Mr. Schmitt on his proposals. Mr. Clark asked if they should poll the current members of the Common Council about how they feel about the size of the Common Council. Mr. Fairbairn said it would be helpful to get input from the people doing the job. Ms. Bennett said it would be great to copy all members of the Common Council.

Mr. Fairbairn said he will send a poll to the members of the Common Council and added they are welcome to comment on anything they want to see in the Charter. Mr. Levin commented that during the joint meeting with the Common Council, the issue of Common Council size was not addressed.

VI. **ACCEPTANCE OF MINUTES** [2:05]

A. Regular Meeting: February 4, 2025

The following corrections were made to the minutes:

Correct the spelling of Ms. Rhodes-Small name throughout
Page 4 – 7th paragraph: Mr. Levin should be Mr. Fairbairn
Page 4: last paragraph – part should be party

**** MR. CLARK MOVED TO ACCEPT THE MINUTES AS CORRECTED**
**** MOTION PASSED UNANIMOUSLY**

VII. **ADJOURNMENT** [2:08]

**** MR. CAMACHO MOVED TO ADJOURN**
**** MOTION PASSED UNANIMOUSLY**

There was no further discussion, and the meeting was unanimously adjourned at 8:38 p.m.

Respectfully submitted,

Rosemarie Lombardi
Telesco Secretarial Services