

Observer Corps Report
Town of Plymouth Charter Commission
Meeting of February 14, 2022 (Via Zoom)

Attendees: William Abbott, David Peck, Wrestling Brewster, Betsy Hall, David Malaguti, Larry Pizer, William Keohan, Frank Mand, Scott Vecchi

Invited Guests Mandi Jo Hanneke and Lynn Griesemer, Amherst Town Councilors:

At the request of Mr. Peck, Ms. Hanneke and Ms. Griesemer spoke about their town's adoption of the council form of government. Some of the points they raised both in their prepared remarks and in response to Commissioner's questions follow.

- Amherst Town Council has 13 members, 3 at-large and 10 district councilors. (The Town has 5 districts, and each district elects two Councilors.)
- The Town Council exercises both policy leadership and legislative powers for the town.
- Amherst made the change from a representative town meeting in 2018 for a number of reasons:
 - It was felt that there was a lack of representation as evidenced by few competitive elections, few contested elections for Town Meeting Members. There had been a decrease in competition for Select Board seats.
 - Residents wanted the views and ideas of those who governed to be more evident.
 - Residents wanted to bring a more deliberative process to government and wanted year-around government. (The Town Meeting Warrant is yes/no, not deliberative.)
 - It seemed that many Town Meeting Members only paid attention to the articles in the Warrant when they got to Town Meeting, maybe because they had no say in their drafting.
 - The Town Council government gets better press and is actively followed. There is more attention and public comment before issues reach the vote stage.
 - The council form helps to reach compromise.
 - The Amherst Home Rule Charter contains special provisions for a transition period from representative town meeting to town council.
 - There had been unclear lines of authority under the Representative Town Meeting format. The new Charter states: "Neither the Town Council nor any individual member thereof shall give orders or directions either publicly or privately to any employee of the Town not appointed by the Town Council."

Ms. Hall's questions: *Inclusionary zoning (affordable housing)?* Answer: Previously no one was able to build to meet requirements, but under the council form new by-laws were passed to improve the situation. *Salaries?* Councilors are paid \$5,000/yr. and the President of the Council, \$7,500. *Licensing?* There is a Board of License Commissioners. This function was not assigned to the Council because it was felt that licensing takes time and expertise.

Mr. Pizer's questions: *Cost of running for town council?* \$8 -10,000 for at-large councilors, less for district councilors. *Handling emergencies?* Outdoor dining and retail changes in the face of COVID were quick. The Council passed a 1/12th budget to allow flexibility. The

purchase of a truck that cost more than expected was not unduly delayed. CPA allocations can be made off-cycle. *How Council makes policy?* Council generally works through the various Town Council committees.

Mr. Keohan's questions: *What were growing pains and what went well?* The well-formed committees met all deadlines; outreach through district meetings was successful, deliberation really took place. Initially, there was “what goes where, how to deal with stuff” confusion. Figuring out roles was important, e.g. both the Town Council and the Planning Board hold public hearings on by-law changes. Also, there is a CPA Committee, but the use of CPA funds is a Council job.

Mr. Malaguti's questions: *Unpopular moves by councilors?* There is a citizen referendum provision if a decision proves unpopular. There are no recall provisions because councilors only have a two-year term.

Mr. Abbott's observation: 240 town meeting members would be consolidated into 13 councilors. At one point in Plymouth's history a 60-member town meeting proposal lasted only a few weeks because it was seen as the worst of both forms.

Mr. Mand's question: *Issues subject to the citizen referendum?* Renovations to the main library, and change of zoning to create a parking garage.

Ms. Hall's question: *Role of the Community Participation Officer?* Name is self-descriptive. There are now three people in that role. They also assist with diversity.

Mr. Brewster's questions: *Were either of you former Town Meeting Reps?* Mandi replied, yes, she was. She now feels more of a sense of personal responsibility. As a Town Meeting Rep, she was one of many. She said she saw too many reps open the warrant for the first time when they entered town meeting. Councilors need to be plugged in and pay attention. One of the women noted: “If I ran a business like Town Meeting, it would be doomed!” She also observed that the Town Manager (executive and administrative functions) seems to have a bit more power without a Select Board overseeing him/her.

Mr. Pizer's question: *Turnout for elections?* It has been much higher than it was for Town Meeting, but one election coincided with a state-wide election and the second had an issue that drove attendance. *Taxes?* The Town uses the 2 1/2%+growth to determine its budget so the taxes go up every year.

Mr. Vecchi's question: *Town Council interference with town employees?* The Charter specifically forbids Town Council or any member of the Council to speak to any town employee not directly appointed by them. Only the Town Manager can. Reportedly, employee satisfaction has grown.

Invited Guest Mark Sideris, President of the Watertown Town Council:

Mr. Peck had also invited Mr. Sideris to speak. He related that Watertown, with a population of 36,000 and an area of 4.1 square miles, had changed from Town Meeting to Town Council in 1980. (The Charter was subsequently amended to update the name to City Council since Watertown is a city.) He has been a member of the City Council since 1995 and Council President since 2009. He's also been involved in 3 Charter Review Committees.

- Watertown has 9 City Councilors: 4 district, 4 at large, and 1 Council President who also sits on the school committee. It also employs a professional Town Manager.

Questions: *Interference*? Like Amherst there is no interference by Council with Town employees. *Is his longevity typical*? No, but rather than term limits, Watertown has elections every two years.

Further remarks by Mr. Sedaris:

He thinks the District Council idea would be “great” for Plymouth.

The City Council approves all contracts that the Town Manager negotiates.

Most Councilors have other jobs. Lawyers have frequently run for the City Council.

Public Comment:

Mr. Ken Christofori, Precinct 13, stated that he believed no Town Manager should be removed except by a super majority. He also said that the town will soon be looking at the disposition of the Pilgrim power plant land so the government we have then will be important.

Mr. Steven Bolotin said he expects that the Planning Board can remain an elected body.

New Business:

Chair Abbott reminded the Commissioners that it is time for them to begin to narrow down their preferences and to come up with some preferred forms.

Respectfully submitted,
Lyle Lawrence

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