

Observer Corps Report Town of Plymouth Charter Commission Meeting of November 1, 2021

Present: W. Brewster, B. Hall, D. Malaguti, L. Pizer, B. Abbott, B. Keohane, S. Vecchi.

Via Zoom: F. Mann. Absent: D. Peck.

Guest Speaker John Mahoney, former Select Board member, speaking about Municipal Finances.

He described Ply. Town Financial activity as responsible and conservative, giving many examples:

Facilities Maintenance fund.

New Town Hall financed from meals tax earmark.

Sewer line failure resolution, which was an excellent example of private-state collaboration, involved use of water trust funds as well as a favorable lawsuit resolution, resulting in Plymouth being 1 of 3 MA communities with a redundant town sewer system.

Enterprise funds – self sufficient since FY 13, so that double taxation is avoided.

Pavement Management Stabilization fund.

Nuclear Mitigation fund.

Achievement of Best Audit status for past 10 years.

Rising S & P municipal bond rating scores since '98, from A+ to AA+, and one of only 16 MA municipalities with that high rating including Boston and Duxbury.

Throughout his remarks, he was complimentary regarding Plymouth's financial actions and results, led by the "best Financial Director in MA".

He described Plymouth's Economic Development ingredients, or assets, as land, wastewater treatment system, water, roads, fiscal stability, as well as works in progress such as the 1000 acres in South Plymouth, sewer system in downtown, only need 1 more well (without growth).

He stressed that 1. Often he has asked a variety of people in Town 'How will a change in form of government lead to a change/improvement in our financial situation?' No one has given him even one example. 2. Plymouth has already made a lot of changes and improvements in the financial aspect of our government.

Many questions from the commissioners and responses followed, including:

-Hall: What suggestions do you have for a new charter? John will think about his answer and email commissioners, which will be posted on the Charter Commission website.

-Hall: How did Plymouth achieve so many improvements in the financial aspect of Town government? We elected, appointed, hired good people, who are well motivated who recommend good policies. And at Town Meeting, if the SB members can describe how the \$ items will be good for the taxpayers, TMM approves.

-Hall: What is the role of the Advisory and Fin Com, including the recent 15-0 warrant recommendations, not hearing from A&FC how to cut Town Hall staff, how to prevent increasing taxes every year, and need to have TMM start working 6 months ahead of TM as the budget is being built?

-Malaguti: Taxes in Plymouth won't be going down due to all the new development and population growth in Plymouth. But taxes shouldn't increase exponentially.

-Mahoney: He responded to the increasing taxes concern with a long and complicated discussion of possible ways to keep taxes in check and still fund new schools, that he has discussed with former Superintendent Maestes.

-Mand: As a reporter going to many government meetings, he observed that taxes were contained after the sewer debacle thanks to professional, hardworking staff and politicians working together.

-Abbott: Does A&FC get involved in budget process early enough? What about role of SB? Both Abbott and Mahoney agreed that A&FC should get involved early in the budget process and that SB should focus on long term policy making and vision.

-Keohane: How can our Charter improve SB function?

-Malaguti: current charter is clear that Town Manager is hired to perform day to day operations.

-Pizer: How can our charter advise the SB regarding supervision of the Town Manager?

-Hall: How can our charter insure that Master Plan details are incorporated into day to day decisions?

As noted above, the discussion was often free ranging and not all questions were answered at this time.

(Continued) Discussion of items for possible inclusion in a new charter.

a. Number of TMM?

Pizer: What is goal of TMM deliberations? Wisdom in guiding our government may best be achieved when all TMM represent and vote with all of Plymouth in mind as opposed to what is good for their precinct only. He recommends number no less than now.

Abbott: Recommends a fixed number, not increasing or decreasing with number of precincts.

Hall: Dartmouth has 390 TMM, and pop. of 34,000 and currently good government.

Brewster: Concerned about difficulty of having TMM vote themselves out of office if a decrease in TMM number is recommended, but advantage of lower number of TMM maybe increase voter turnout.

Malaguti: Recommends 5 – 6 TMM per precinct saying we can accomplish good government with that smaller number.

Keohane: Yes there is low voter turnout now, but we can increase that with citizen education.

Abbott: Recently there have been competitive TMM races with letters, mailing, signs in Prec. 12.

Vecchi: Recommends 2 – 3 TM per precinct to increase voter turnout.

Pizer: Don't mix competitive races and increase voter turnout with ideal number of TMM. Since the statistics show that the greatest turnout is for Presidential elections, followed by medium turnout for State elections, with least turnout for Town/City Elections.

Mand: We need greater TMM than 2 – 3/precinct to gain more ideas and greater diversity of citizens including youth.

Abbott: the strength of TMM form of government is larger groups of elected officials, that is not expensive, often not paid, and it is not expensive to run for TMM.

Hall: if TMM number is larger, no need to worry about the few who don't attend or participate well, or the precincts that don't fill all TMM seats, since all the other TMM are attending and doing a good job.

Public Comment

R. Caproni – Precinct 15. He expressed concern that 6 out of the 9 Commission members were supported by the Citizens for a Better Plymouth, that the Commission seems to be interested in the 'same ole, same ole' form of government, it doesn't seem to welcome giving the voters a 'choice' on the ballot, and that TM rejected the ADU article. He stated that 'choice' will happen, I assure you.' And spoke longer than the 7 min. allotted per speaker, in spite of being requested to bring his remarks to a close.

P. Neville – Precinct 10. He thanked commissioners for being so knowledgeable and stated how impressed he was with the questions they asked. He suggested that Harry Salarno would be able to offer good comments about A&FC, and stated that he, as a former A&FC member was NOT familiar with the Master Plan, that TMM might benefit from educational materials as well as reading the book Bowling Alone, that he supports redundancy in leadership positions to cover when people like Town Manager is leaving, and that in collective bargaining one person should represent all 13 unions. In closing he again expressed his 'sincere thank you' to the commissioners.

B.Cavaco – SB member, via Zoom. She expressed her support of students participating with Charter Commission (CC). She stated that the SB is very pro-active Board and asked if the CC would be inviting the whole SB to meet with the CC? Chair Abbott responded that the CC follows State Statues closely and invited Cavaco, again, to come before the CC. However, Cavaco stated again her preference for a meeting with the whole SB as well as again for her support of 'choice' on the ballot.

During and after Cavaco's remarks, discussion continued regarding the role of the SB, with commissioners pointing out the current Charter, and By-Laws, regarding SB role in long term planning as opposed to day to day activities, and confirming that the SB role is to follow the Charter and By-Laws.

Pizer was allowed to contribute his comments about the items discussed at the last meeting when he was unable to be present:

Reprecincting – He was impressed that the SB reprecincting process was so open and fruitful, in spite of delay in getting Census information from State this year.

Filling vacancies – SB is special per State law.

Term Limits – Voters voting works, so no need for term limits, even if you sometimes need special elections.

A&FC 15 – 0 votes – Is that really bad? Does that really mean that the A&FC is not doing their job?

Throughout this meeting, commissioners stated that they were impressed with and thankful for the many hours of diligent work of the A&FC. Much of the commissioners discussion of the role of the A&FC came from reading about the role and responsibilities of A&FC in other MA municipalities.

Submitted by Martha Vautrain

Observer Corp Member LWV Plymouth Area