



Ward 3 Neighborhood Planning Assembly

Wednesday, February 5, 2025

Sharon Bushor Room, Burlington City Hall

Meeting Minutes

1. Welcome & Call to Order

The meeting was called to order at approximately 6:30 PM by Chris Haessly, Ward 3 NPA Steering Committee member.

2. Attendee Introductions

- **Officials/Steering Committee Members:**
 - Melo Grant, City Councilor, Central District
 - Jeannie Waltz, School Commissioner, Central District
 - Michelle Borbas, Ward 3 NPA Steering Committee
 - Chris Haessly, Ward 3 NPA Steering Committee
 - Charlie Messing, Ward 3 NPA Steering Committee
 - Amy Prenowitz, Ward 3 NPA Steering Committee
- **Staff/Presenters:**
 - Shawny Corey, NPA Public Engagement Specialist
 - Gene Bergman, City Councilor, Ward 2
 - Claire Wool, School Commissioner, Ward 6
- **Community Members/Public:**
 - Alan Rubin, College Street
 - Suki Rubin, College Street
 - Charlie Giannoni, CCTV

3. Public Forum

- **Charlie Messing (College Street):** Spoke briefly, offering words of encouragement and a blessing for the meeting.

4. Town Meeting Day Charter Changes

Presented by: Councilor Gene Bergman, Chair, Charter Change Committee

- **Overview:** Three charter changes are proposed for the Town Meeting Day ballot. All three received unanimous support from the City Council for their content and for being placed on the ballot.
- **Charter Change 1: Regulation of Landlord/Tenant Notices**
 - **Proposal:** To grant the City Council the authority to adopt ordinances that set the notice period requirements for terminating a tenancy and for changes in rent or lease

terms.

- **Reasoning:** The current state-mandated notice periods (90 days for tenancies under two years, 120 days for longer) are insufficient given the current housing crisis. The housing market imbalance between landlords and tenants is significant, making it difficult for tenants to find new housing in the allotted time.
- **Benefit:** This change would allow the City Council to create more flexible, tailored ordinances that can adapt to the city's changing housing market conditions without needing legislative and gubernatorial approval for every adjustment.
- **Charter Change 2: City Redistricting Authority**
 - **Proposal:** To remove the specific ward and district boundary lines from the City Charter and grant Burlington voters the authority to approve redistricting maps proposed by the City Council.
 - **Reasoning:** Currently, any change to Burlington's ward lines must be approved by the state legislature and the governor. This process is cumbersome and gives state-level officials, who have little to no stake or knowledge of Burlington's neighborhoods, control over local districting. Montpelier already has a similar system.
 - **Benefit:** This would place the final decision-making power for local election districts directly in the hands of Burlington voters.
- **Charter Change 3: Ban on Guns in Bars**
 - **Proposal:** To reinstate a ban on carrying firearms in establishments that serve alcohol.
 - **Reasoning:** This measure, based on the principle that guns and alcohol do not mix, was previously passed by approximately 70% of Burlington voters in 2014 but has not been advanced by the state legislature. Spurred by the recent murder at Red Square, legislators advised that bringing the issue back to voters would be an important step to show current public sentiment.
 - **Process:** The full text of all charter changes will be available at polling places and on the city clerk's website. The ballot will feature a shorter, summarized version of each question.

5. School Budget Presentation

Presented by: Claire Wool, School Commission Chair & Jeannie Waltz, School Commissioner

- **Proposed Budget & Tax Rate:**
 - The school board is proposing a budget that will result in a **4% decrease** in the school property tax rate.
 - This follows a double-digit increase last year, which was driven by rising healthcare costs and the first major borrowing for the new high school and technical center bond.
 - The proposed budget is \$134 million, with a per-pupil spending figure of \$14,825 (a 6.7% increase in spending per pupil, which is distinct from the overall tax rate).
 - For a home valued at \$370,000, the 4% decrease translates to an estimated annual savings of \$238.

- **Key Factors & Financial Health:**

- **Act 127:** The district is benefiting from the second year of Act 127, a new state law that changed the pupil weighting formula. This formula now provides more equitable funding to districts like Burlington that have a higher percentage of students with greater needs (English Language Learners, students requiring intervention).
- **Enrollment & Staffing:** While enrollment has seen slight drops, it remains robust compared to statewide trends. The district has been "right-sizing" by reducing staff positions through attrition and retirements as enrollment numbers change, avoiding large-scale layoffs.
- **Fiscal Responsibility:** The district did not use temporary federal ESSER funds for permanent staffing positions, avoiding a "fiscal cliff" that other districts are now facing. Audits have been clean for the past eight years.
- **Student Demographics:** Burlington is the most diverse school district in Vermont.
 - White: 60% (vs. 88.7% state average)
 - Black/African-American: 18%
 - Asian: 7% (vs. 2.2% state average)
 - Hispanic/Latino: 5% (vs. 2.6% state average)
 - 47 different languages are spoken at home by students.

6. Candidate Forum & City Council Updates

- **Jeannie Waltz, Candidate for School Commissioner (District Central)**

- **Priorities:** Is running for re-election to see key initiatives through, chief among them fighting to ensure the equitable funding from **Act 127** is not reversed. She is also excited to see the new high school open its doors during her next term.
- **On Board Size:** Believes the current number of commissioners is appropriate given the workload, the complexity of managing 12 different school programs, the tech center, and the need for diverse perspectives.
- **On Contract Negotiations:** Noted that negotiations for the three main bargaining units (teachers, paraeducators, and support staff) are ongoing and complex, with a recent trend of districts comparing agreements across the state.

- **Melo Grant, Candidate for City Councilor (District Central)**

- **Priorities:** Wants to continue the work of addressing the city's complex, long-term issues, particularly housing and community safety. She is a strong supporter of Mayor Mulvaney-Stanak.
- **Housing:** Stressed the urgent need for more housing of all types to address affordability, support local businesses, and grow the grand list. Expressed grave concern about the rise of "NIMBYism" ("Not In My Back Yard") in the city, which she feels is hindering necessary development.
- **Community Safety & BPD:** Believes the city has been slow to respond to the drug crisis, which impacted the central district first. She is concerned by what she sees as a

lack of a city-wide perspective from some councilors on safety issues.

- **BPD Recruitment & Reputation:** Argued that the Burlington Police Department has a severe reputation problem that hinders recruitment. She believes a strategic plan is needed to improve the department's image, using modern tools like social media, and criticized the lack of transparency and leadership in addressing these issues. She pointed to the BPOA survey as a crucial, eye-opening document that should be used as a blueprint for rebuilding.
- **Resolutions:** Expressed frustration with recent council resolutions that she feels are premature, disrespectful to the mayor, and serve as gestures rather than concrete plans.

7. Questions & Answers Session Highlights

- **Q (to Councilor Bergman):** Will the city be able to limit how early a landlord can ask a tenant to declare their intention to renew a lease?
 - **A:** Yes, Councilor Bergman believes the proposed charter change is written broadly enough to allow the council to pass an ordinance regulating the timing of such notices.
- **Q (to School Board):** How might potential executive orders from the Trump administration affect the district?
 - **A:** It is "deeply concerning." While there are no direct impacts yet, the district has been proactively preparing and firming up protocols for months to protect students and staff (e.g., requiring a signed warrant for ICE to enter a school).
- **Q (to Councilor Grant):** When can residents expect to cross Battery Street safely?
 - **A:** While there is a major project planned for the Battery Street corridor, it is not immediate. Councilor Grant acknowledged the danger and took note of the concern.

8. Adjournment

The meeting was adjourned at approximately 8:45 PM.