



BURLINGTON CITY COUNCIL CHARTER CHANGE COMMITTEE

11/29/2016

Charter Change Committee Meeting

November 29, 2016

Minutes

Present: Kurt Wright (KW), Chair; Sara Giannoni (SG); Joan Shannon (JS)

Staff: Eileen Blackwood, City Attorney (EB)

Other attendees: Adam Roof (AR)

Meeting called to order at 4:45 pm by Chair Wright.

1. Agenda: JS moved to accept the agenda, SG seconded. Unanimous.
2. Minutes of Nov. 15, 2016: Postponed action
3. Public forum: None

4.01 Party designation: AR spoke in support of amending the charter: 17 VSA 2681a governs—party designation may not be listed unless charter provides for it, town has voted, or in absence of previous consideration, legislative body decides to permit. City Attorney's Office found no evidence of vote being taken, so there is value in allowing voters to decide. In 1990's voters voted to remove party designation from school board. Our community is stronger when we have open conversations about how we are governed, and the ballot is the key to our local governance system. Now more than ever, those in positions of power must seek out opportunities to create dialogue in the public realm. AR asked that the conversation not end here, but go to the Council for a full discussion—recommendation to the council to place a non-binding question on the ballot, asking if local designations should or should not be included on the ballot.

KW asked EB to review the legal options. EB explained that the charter does not explicitly provide for party designation, although City had made the change for the school board as a charter change. AR asked if charter versus other issue could be because of changes post-statute. EB explained that CA's office interpretation has been that charter



BURLINGTON CITY COUNCIL CHARTER CHANGE COMMITTEE

11/29/2016

implicitly allows party designation, as it was city practice prior to statute. JS expressed concern that voters will think council recommends. JS is concerned that when someone runs as Independent, people assume or don't know where they stand on issues. KW asked why not let voters decide. JS said she doesn't want to be assumed to be supporting this change if the council puts it on the ballot.

AR argued that ballot is not place where we should be educating voters by telling them which party someone is. Voters should be encouraged to do their own research, make their own decisions. Bringing in partisanship affects the outcomes. SG agrees with JS that we can't change the reality of voters relying on party designation. She would be far more passionate about putting time and energy into exploring how to educate voters than pursuing this type of change. JS noted that parties also help disseminate information and build in volunteer support to educate voters, and an individual candidate may not be able to afford to do as much education as party support can provide. SG said that if you allow parties to do all that work and just remove the designation from the ballot, you are hiding information from voters. AR said there is no proposal for the council; the proposal is to put a non-binding question to the voters. SG said if someone votes by party designation, that's not manipulation; that's the voter informing themselves. KW raised examples of other communities where there is no party designation and the focus is on the candidates themselves.

JS moves to recommend to the council taking no action on party designation in all municipal offices; SG seconds. 2-1 (KW opposed). EB clarified that after Chair Wright reports this action at the council meeting, any councilor can introduce a resolution on the issue.

4.02 Councilor pay: AR noted that the goal should be for there to be a package that attracts more diverse people to serve on the council. He reiterated the concept of providing health benefits might be a way to attract new people to serve. KW said that focusing on pay is worthwhile, and maybe considering a package, but he believes that putting it on the ballot, particularly if the amount is small, is positive. The community voted overwhelmingly for the last increase. Councilors serve a valuable function, and it has been a long time since they had a raise. Other benefits is a longer term discussion, but just on an inflationary basis and with the reduction of 2 councilors, an increase should occur.

SG called a few places around the country—some the same size, some not. She has a spreadsheet. A number of places allow councilors to buy into the health plan. Bozeman, MT has 4 councilors, plus a mayor who is part of the council, but none are full-time. They pay \$14,400 per year and they can buy into benefits. KW called Ithaca, NY and they pay their councilors \$10,000 a year, and it is a little smaller city (30,000). Also, he called Rutland, VT, who gets \$2,300 and Burlington has a more complex government. KW called Schenectady \$14,000, and they're 60,000 people. Concord, NH pays \$1000. He spoke to 2 cities that offered health benefits and 5-6 that didn't. SG called Chico, CA (\$7200), size of 80,000. Fayetteville, AK (\$12,857).

AR mentioned that having staff support as well should be discussed. KW pointed out that that expense can be decided in the budget and doesn't require a charter change. KW thinks health care is a much longer discussion. KW said VT legislature no longer offers health insurance to legislators since VT Health Connect came in.



BURLINGTON CITY COUNCIL CHARTER CHANGE COMMITTEE

11/29/2016

EB will research whether adding health benefits must be part of charter or can be done by budget action. KW would like to see this on the March ballot. He thinks the only issue is what number to plug in. It's a tiny figure in the budget. JS said the Democratic caucus didn't have a positive reaction to this idea. The school board gets paid nothing, and that's arguably an even more thankless job. But that is their problem. KW also noted that it was that way when it was increased before. JS reported that this is public service; it's not supposed to be a job. Also, what is the reason—to attract more people? SG asked whether there needed to be more discussion. KW said because there is a higher workload, it's time to adjust the pay. Councilors were paid \$500 a year before about 2000. In 2003, JS recalls receiving \$3000, which was meaningful. SG asked how to come to an amount. KW said it should be not crazy but looking at Ithaca and Rutland, we ought to consider \$4 or 5,000. JS asked about considering inflation, and SG noted the 2 fewer councilors and the increased workload. JS noted that we should consider adding an inflation index to automatically increase the amount. KW believes voters will find an increase justified. The Committee discussed inflation rates and comparisons to other communities. KW suggested \$4500, which is based on inflation (almost \$1000 since 2003), plus an extra \$500 for having 2 fewer councilors.

SG moved to recommend to council that it place a question on the ballot to increase councilor pay to \$4500, based on inflation and increased workload; JS seconded. Unanimous. JS also asked EB to look into the question of the benefits. EB will prepare ballot question for council.

4.03 EB reported on discussions with mayor and her office about mayor's inability to veto council procedural vote but that council will separate two votes. The Committee was comfortable with that research. EB will put something in writing to clarify.

4.04 EB reported on the CAO's reason for wanting changes in the tax dates. The Committee asked whether the Assessor agreed. EB will check and bring back to this Committee.

4.05 No additional issues.

5. Next meeting: Thurs. at 3 pm, Dec. 8. EB will call Liz Mickenberg to attend next meeting.

6. Adjournment: SG moved & JS seconded. Meeting adjourned at 6:06 pm.

