



BURLINGTON CITY COUNCIL CHARTER CHANGE COMMITTEE

6/2/2016

Minutes of Charter Change Committee Meeting

June 2, 2016

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

Staff: Eileen Blackwood, City Attorney (EB)

Other speakers: Councilor Adam Roof

Other attendees: Martha Lang, Joel Baird, Kelsey (VT Digger)

Meeting called to order at 5:05 pm.

1. Minutes—SG moved to accept the minutes, JS seconded. Unanimous
2. Public forum—no speakers
3. Agenda—SG moved to accept agenda; JS seconded. Unanimous

4.01 Party Designation on Municipal Election Ballots— EB handed out a list of charter references about political party designations, but noted the charter did not require mayor or council to run by party. Because state statute requires some action, it must either have occurred by public or council vote, but is not recent. City Attorney's Office will have to research how party affiliation on ballots came about.

Councilor Adam Roof noted there are arguments for and against, and discussion is better had in public.

SG said she would not be comfortable with the council's deciding without a public vote. She is open to putting the issue before the voters now. People in her neighborhood like to see what party a person is affiliated with.





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JS agreed with Roof that it would be nice for voters to decide, but when an issue is put on the ballot, there is an implication the councilors support the item. JS's issue is that if you take away party designation, you're left with the name and address and have no idea of ideology. Partisanship does have some downsides, but this isn't necessarily taking away the caucusing of elected officials based on party or ideology, just what voters are told before they are elected.

SG agreed.

KW countered that many other municipalities think it works great—people can seek endorsement of a party, but that's not the focus. You could have people run cross-party. He's heard people say they're sick of the partisanship. The Hatch Act also affects local races, if they are partisan. He thinks Burlington is the only partisan local election in the state. He finds people coming out in March are voting for a reason. On balance, people would prefer to do away with parties.

SG noted that city officials could choose to be less partisan and run cross-party, but don't.

KW responded that it doesn't happen here. He also thought that this proposal did not include the mayor's race.

JS clarified (and Councilor Roof agreed) that it does—any municipal office.

KW said the Committee could choose to exclude the mayoral race.

JS thought conversation could be more productive once we figure out how we got where we are today. —for example, if this isn't a charter change issue.

Councilor Roof asked if the school decision to change to be non-partisan was in the charter. EB reported that it is. KW asked if the partisan nature had been in the old charter and changed. EB did not know.

Joel Baird asked for clarification of who was meant if the town or legislative body had to vote and it was clarified.

KW called Peter Deslauriers, former mayor of St. Albans to address the committee by phone. He asked Mr. Deslauriers why St. Albans did away with the partisan election. Mr. Deslauriers said it didn't seem to make sense. Also, they had a person working for the federal government who couldn't run for a local office because of the Hatch Act. Mr. Deslauriers did not like it, when he first ran as a Republican, that another Republican told him he had to vote with his party, so he wanted to





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do away with party politics. It just seemed simple to do. He understands parties at the national level, but not at the local level, for a community the size of St. Albans. He later ran as a Democrat and won too. JS asked about the size and makeup of the council. Mr. Deslauriers reported that at the time, there was 1 Republican on the board; the rest were Democrats. No one voted by party. When asked, he confirmed that the change included removing party affiliation for the mayor's position. Everyone wanted the best people at the table. He confirmed St. Albans City has 6 wards, 6 councilors. Its population is 7-8000, about 1000 people per district.

Roof asked if St. Albans experienced any confusion or problems as the change was made? No. Mr. Deslauriers noted that if people see a party name, they may vote for the party. If not, they vote for the person. Not necessarily everyone was happy, but they held public hearings and heard people out. This was not an issue in St. Albans's charter, so it was just a matter of changing it, which was done easily.

JS moved to postpone further consideration of this matter to the next meeting, asking the City Attorney to bring some background to the next meeting. SG seconded. Unanimous

5. Next items: The Committee agreed to postpone action on items 4.02 and 4.03 until next meeting. Neither JS nor SG has other items to bring up.

KW proposed that the Committee ask the Council for authority to take up the following issues:

- Police commission role not well defined—and they have said they want some guidance. All agreed they should ask the Council to refer this issue to the Committee for discussion.

- Mayoral veto on procedural matters of council. KW wouldn't want the mayor, if the council postponed action on a matter, to tell the council they had to take it up. JS said it sounds good to have clarification on this issue. EB noted the mayor has broad veto power in the charter. All agreed they should ask the Council to refer this issue to the Committee for discussion.

- Board of Finance role in relationship to mayor's budget—ability to offer amendments. All agreed they should ask the Council to refer this issue to the Committee for discussion.

- Hardship exemption shouldn't be voted on by mayor, but just council alone. JS thinks this is already before the council for discussion, and the others agreed.

- Parking policy jurisdiction. SG and JS think it's better to have those parking decisions made by appointed Commission, not partisan Council. So the Committee will not ask the Council to refer.

- Role of BCA in tax appeals. This is item 4.02 and will be taken up next meeting.

6. Next meeting: June 22 at 5 pm. Agenda will include report back from City Attorney on 4.01, 4.03, and prioritization of items. Following meeting: June 30 at 3 pm re: 4.03 review of tax appeals process only.



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7. Meeting adjourned at 6:03 pm.