

Charter Review Committee (CRC)
Town of Groton, Groton, MA 01450 978-448-1111

Meeting Minutes - July 8, 2015

At Town Hall

All Present: Jane Allen, Michael Bouchard (Clerk (for committee), Town Clerk), Robert Collins, Scott Harker, Michael Manugian (Chair), Bud Robertson (Vice-Chair, Finance Committee), Stuart Schulman (BOS)

Visitors: Peter Cunningham (BOS), Melisa Doig (Dir. HR), Judy Anderson, Stanley Jackson, Barry Pease

Recorder: Stephen Legge

Call to Order: Chairman Manugian called the meeting to order at 7:01 PM.

Chairman Manugian announced that the Board of Selectmen has designated the Charter Review Committee as “Special Municipal Employees”.

Approval of Meeting Minutes:

It was moved and seconded to approve the minutes of Wednesday, June 24th, as amended. Approved unanimously, with one abstention (Mr. Collins).

It was moved and seconded to approve the minutes of Wednesday, July 1st. Discussion ensued and minor modifications were made. Approved as amended unanimously, with one abstention (Mr. Harker). Mr. Bouchard will incorporate the changes.

Discussion on Newly Designed Website for Charter Review Committee:

Mr. Bouchard: Mr. Manugian has created a website database for inputs by those expected to comment on the charter. It will include name and contact information, a sequentially assigned number ID, the date of submission, recommended change and a rationale for making the change. The site will generate an automated response to all who register comments, containing the date of submission and number ID.

Mr. Bouchard passed out several screenshots of pages that will appear on the new site. Reports will also be generated. For committee members’ use, a report on responses collected to-date, submitters, dates and number IDs will be available. The committee will consider responses and post to the site, for public consumption, summaries of input received on an on-going basis.

Mr. Collins: Suggested announcing meeting times and locations in a prominent position on the site.

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Mr. Harker: Suggested announcing on the new site re-broadcast times during the week of video-recorded committee meetings on cable TV.

Discussion of Plans for the First Scheduled Public Hearing:

Mr. Manugian: The public hearing is scheduled for July 22nd, in two weeks. The Committee does not expect to receive a significant amount of public input into charter changes at the hearing. The committee is requesting input to be in writing. Written change proposals will be accepted up to and including Friday, September 18th.

Mr. Manugian passed out a Table of Contents summary for the Charter, with page numbers, to assist all who wish to study and work with the document. (The charter is 24 pages long, available on the town website.) Mr. Bouchard will put this on the new Charter Review Committee website.

Mr. Manugian handed out a 10-slide proposed presentation for the public, to be delivered at the upcoming first public hearing. Included is a slide summarizing Wednesday meeting dates for the weeks through September, based on the availability of a minimum of six of the seven members.

Mr. Bouchard: There is reason to be concerned about how to “talk” in a timely way with all the town entities, officers, department heads, boards and committee members, of which he counts about 70 in number.

Mr. Collins: Should we send something in writing to each town entity (as Mr. Bouchard defines them) in advance of the public hearing.

Mr. Manugian suggested sending our procedure for the public hearing and the schedule outline to all, as a minimum, in advance of the hearing. Mr. Bouchard to follow up.

Mr. Harker: Concern with the public hearing arrangements and the September 18th deadline for written change proposals – he wants to maximize attendance possible and extend the written submission deadline.

Mr. Manugian: We walk a fine line on this. We want all to have time to input, but also we need some structure and an endpoint for submissions in order to carry out a disciplined review of changes and how they may interact with each other. We are responsible to the town to make a well thought-out proposal for the spring town meeting – we have October through January to do this. Mr. Manugian favors sticking with the current deadline.

Mr. Harker: It helps that there is intended to be a second public hearing, after September 18th, to have the opportunity to comment on the totality of proposed changes offered initially.

Mr. Manugian handed out a draft of the one-page form to be used by the public to submit proposed changes to the charter. It requests name and contact information, but allows for anonymous input. Change to the charter provisions and justification for the change is required information.

Committee’s Proposed Communications Plan, for Public Information:

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Mr. Manugian discussed the committee's proposed plan for communication with the press and public. All communication must be handled formally and in concert with open meeting laws of the commonwealth. Manugian warned that four or more members may not gather to discuss the business of the committee without posting the meeting in accordance with the Open Meeting Law .

Mr. Bouchard ventured that he wanted to be able to talk individually with the public outside of meetings as long as conversations were within the law. Mr. Manugian answered that committee members should be prudent about offering personal opinions on matters of substance to the public. Most or all such discussion should take place in the public meetings of the committee, where a record is kept. Matters of procedure and process are perfectly acceptable to discuss with the public outside of the meetings. On the outside, it was agreed, we should be more listeners than talkers.

It was specifically discussed and agreed that in the setting of another town committee meeting, it was acceptable and strongly desirable that a Charter Review Committee member be free to discuss charter changes and express personal opinions as they related to their membership on his/her other committee.

Mr. Harker: This is the first charter review committee ever established in Groton; we should be very careful how we do everything. On the outside when we speak, it should be as "we", not "I".

Mr. Manugian on newspaper and press policy: For a public hearing a legal notice must be published in the paper(s) in accordance with town policy. At present this is done in the Groton Herald, or the Lowell Sun in the classified section. We can periodically put out press releases to inform the public of the committee's progress. The Herald has been generous about publishing official news issued by town entities. Mr. Manugian asked that the committee authorize himself and Mr. Bouchard to send releases to the press as necessary. The committee so authorized.

Mr. Collins: Get on Jane Bouvier's "Around Town" talk show on cable TV. The committee agreed, and Mr. Manugian asked Mr. Bouchard to check with Ms. Bouvier on this. He also cautioned that up to three members could go on the show together, but no more without posting a meeting in accordance with the Open Meeting Law. Mr. Bouchard will ask to get on before July 22nd, if possible.

Mr. Robertson: Questioned for clarification how committees (as opposed to individuals) are to submit change proposals. They are expected to use the same form as previously discussed, but for "submitter" should identify themselves as the town committee or other town entity.

Mr. Manugian expressed satisfaction that up to five channels for public information had been identified in discussions, three newspapers, the Groton line (online) and the TV program "Around Town".

Mr. Collins: Where will the July 22nd public hearing be held? Visitor, Mr. Cunningham answered, the 2nd Floor conference Room in Town Hall which can accommodate 150 people.

Committee Review of Town Charter Articles 3 & 4 (partial):

Committee members in turn summarized each individual section of the charter for the public watching the video recording of the meeting. They began with Article 3, starting on Page C:6, having to do with elected officers in the town. Section 3-1 was noted as a particularly important section in which general provisions for elected town officers are spelled out. Subjects covered include filling unscheduled vacancies, recall procedures and requirements for citizen petitions.

Sections 3-2 through 3-8 provide specific provisions for each of the town's major elected officers: selectmen, regional school committee members, town moderator and deputy, housing authority members, planning board members, electric light commissioners and trustees of the public library.

In Section 3-4, Groton Housing Authority, it was noted that four of five members are voted for by the town and the fifth member is appointed by the state.

Article 4 of the Charter, The Town Manager, beginning on Page C:13, is also of specific interest, since this office is a new one for the town, created when the Charter was first adopted, and obviously a very high profile office. The committee summarized through the first three sections of Article 4 covering appointment, qualification, review procedure, powers and duties, removal and suspension.

It was noted that the town manager is an appointed and contracted position, not subject to the town's salary administration plan. Of interest is that the town manager position has a high bar for suspension and removal: a 4-1 vote minimum by the Selectmen is required.

The committee concluded its discussion of the charter content at the end of Section 4-3 on Page C:16.

Other Business:

Mr. Bouchard and Mr. Manugian will get together after the meeting to work the matters assigned to the two of them.

Mr. Collins moved to authorize Mr. Manugian and Mr. Bouchard to develop language for public releases. It was seconded and passed unanimously.

The meeting was adjourned with unanimous consent at 8:59PM.

**** The next meeting is the public hearing scheduled for Wednesday, July 22nd. ****