

Summary of Barrington Charter Review Commission Meeting, October 11, 2023

The 2023-2024 Barrington Charter Review Commission (CRC) met on October 11 at the Barrington Middle School. This was the second meeting of the Commission that was formed by the Town Council to do the ten-year review of the Charter required by law. A key focus of the Council's charge for the CRC is to explore possible alternatives to the Financial Town Meeting (FTM) format for approving the Town's budget.

To begin its investigation, the CRC invited Michael Marcello, Esq. to provide background information about other Rhode Island towns that have recently changed from a Financial Town Meeting to a different approach, and to discuss the experiences, processes, and challenges that those communities faced. The discussion touched on the examples of Tiverton, Coventry, Scituate, Bristol, Westerly, and other towns. The CRC also benefitted from research previously done by Town Solicitor Michael Ursillo and Assistant Solicitor Peter Skwirz for the Town Council (in September 2022) outlining alternatives to the FTM, as well as a comprehensive compilation (done by the Town Clerk's office) of the budget authority provisions for all Rhode Island cities and towns.

A number of important issues were raised in the discussion, including (but not limited to): the value of public participation in the budget process; the challenge of disseminating accurate and timely information to voters; the levels of accountability for different players (e.g., Town Council, School Committee, Committee on Appropriations, voters) under various scenarios; the costs and logistics of various approaches; the importance of having a mechanism for citizen-initiated safety checks included in the budget process; the implications of having elected versus appointed officials deciding on the budget; and the latitude the CRC has in designing a new proposal for Barrington to consider. All of these issues (and more) will be considered more fully as the CRC continues its deliberations.

Given that determining its budget is arguably the most important decision a town makes each year, the CRC stressed the importance of soliciting public input in the Charter review process, especially as it relates to possible changes to the FTM. A survey has been designed to gather ideas and feedback from Barrington residents; a postcard will be sent to every household in Town with a link to the online survey. In addition, the CRC website <https://www.barrington.ri.gov/452/Charter-Review-Commission> contains documentation related to the process, including a copy of the Town Charter, agendas and minutes from CRC meetings, links to video recordings of CRC meetings, and other information. All CRC meetings are open to the public (including broadcast livestream via Zoom). And an email address – barringtoncharterreview2023@gmail.com -- has been established for residents to communicate directly to the CRC to share their ideas and comments.

In addition to public input, the CRC will be meeting with Town officials at upcoming meetings, and has reached out to all Town departments, boards, and commissions for their ideas on suggested revisions to the Charter.

At its October 11 meeting, the CRC also conducted a preliminary review of the entire Charter document, identifying questions for further discussion as well as areas for possible revision. These will be explored in depth at future CRC meetings.

The Commission has devised a vigorous plan of action for its work, driven by the need to present its final recommendations to the Town Council by March 2024 (in order for any proposed Charter revisions accepted by the Town Council to appear as ballot questions at the November 2024 general election).

The next meeting of the Barrington Charter Review Commission will be on Wednesday, November 15, beginning at 6:30 P.M. at Barrington Middle School (Global Classroom, located on the second floor, in the back of the library). The meeting will be streamed live via Zoom as well (viewing only).

The members of the Charter Review Commission are: Kenneth Block, Jeffrey Brenner (Vice Chair), Lisa Daft, Joy Hearn (Chair), Allan Klepper, Sarah O'Brien, Daniel O'Mahony, Stephen Primiano, Thomas TR Rimoshytus, Cynthia Rosengard, and Magnus Thorsson. The CRC is supported by Town Clerk Meredith DeSisto and Deputy Town Clerk Stephanie Bernardo.