

Summary of Barrington Charter Review Commission Meeting, December 13, 2023

The 2023-2024 Barrington Charter Review Commission (CRC) met on December 13 at the Barrington Middle School. This was the fifth 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.

At this meeting, the CRC reviewed the results of the survey of Barrington residents. The purpose of the survey was to gather feedback on the current FTM and budget approval process. A total of 536 residents responded to the survey. The full report and presentation of the survey findings are available via the CRC website. Strong and consistent themes that emerged from the responses and comments included:

- Barrington residents are not satisfied with the current FTM format. Respondents feel that the current FTM structure limits participation. There is a strong desire for greater representation in determining the Town's budget. The lack of participation and representativeness has led many to distrust the process and feel that small groups of special interests play a disproportionate role in making decisions.
- Residents value the opportunity to provide direct feedback, propose changes, and ultimately vote on approval of the final budget.
- Respondents are open to alternatives to the current FTM format.
- Residents are interested in virtual participation (e.g., Zoom meeting, online voting) as a way to expand representation and make the process more efficient.
- Respondents felt that the information available to them, or the methods employed to communicate that information, were not always effective.

Informed by the survey findings as well as other input and discussions to date, the CRC reached consensus on the following conceptual elements to begin to develop a framework for a new budget approval structure:

- Break up the three component functions of the current FTM in a different way:
 - Budget hearing – Presentation of budget information, hear feedback; broadcast online; disseminate budget information widely
 - Mechanism for amendments – Residents should have a way to offer changes to the proposed budget prior to final voting
 - Way for more people to vote – Full-day referendum would address the need to provide more people with the opportunity to participate
- Retain the COA in some form; there is value to having an independent analysis of the Town and School proposed budgets.
- Election of COA members (nonpartisan election) should involve more voters (e.g., conduct the election at the same time as the referendum vote). We should avoid any process that would require COA candidates to file signature petitions and be subject to BOE campaign finance regulations.
- Recommend that the new (referendum) process be assessed after a period of time.

The CRC will continue discussion of possible alternatives to the FTM, in more detail, at its next meeting on January 10. The CRC hopes to submit its recommendations to the Town Council in early spring 2024.

More information can be found on the CRC website <https://www.barrington.ri.gov/452/Charter-Review-Commission>. The CRC's email address – barringtoncharterreview2023@gmail.com – can be used by residents to communicate directly with the CRC to ask questions or share ideas and comments.

The next meeting of the Barrington Charter Review Commission is on Wednesday, January 10, 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).