

Summary of Barrington Charter Review Commission Meeting, January 10, 2024

The 2023-2024 Barrington Charter Review Commission (CRC) met on January 10 at the Barrington Middle School. This was the sixth 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 continued its discussion of possible alternatives to the FTM. Building on the framework agreed to at the December 13 meeting, the group examined in detail what the new budget development and approval process utilizing an all-day referendum vote approach might look like in practice for Barrington residents.

The group reviewed an analysis of how the functions carried out currently at the FTM would be affected under a Financial Town Referendum (FTR) structure, examined the operations and outcomes of other Rhode Island towns that use the FTR format, and considered an outline and description of the possible features and timetable of the proposed FTR for Barrington. CRC members engaged in a lengthy discussion of both the advantages of the voter referendum system and the concerns that such a new approach might present. The group also discussed the mechanics of how the FTR system would operate, the costs of the FTR (especially in comparison to the current FTM), and issues related to the transition from the current FTM to a new FTR process. Woven throughout the discussion was the CRC's overriding consensus that any new process should retain three essential functions: (1) sharing information about the budget, (2) providing residents with the opportunity for comment and amendments, (3) empowering Barrington voters to approve the final budget. (Details of the specific points raised in the discussion are available in the minutes.)

The CRC approved a motion (by a 6-4 vote) to recommend to the Town Council solely the option to keep the FTM format as a dialog and informational meeting and move the voting element to a separate all-day referendum. Also, it was agreed that the election of members of the Committee on Appropriations should take place by ballot at the time of the referendum vote. Further, recognizing that transitioning from the FTM to any alternative approach will require changes to practices, policies, and approaches (some of which are beyond the scope of the Charter), the CRC agreed to recommend that the Town Council carefully monitor the progress and practice of the Financial Town Referendum (should it be approved by the Council and the voters), and that assessment(s) of the FTR be conducted as needed to see if adjustments may be beneficial or necessary.

Finally, the CRC discussed the structure of its report and recommendations to the Town Council. The group agreed that the report will outline the recommended proposal for the new Financial Town Referendum structure and include the rationale behind the proposal. The report will not include specific draft language for ballot questions as there will need to be a legal review of how the questions can be presented to Barrington voters, based on the decisions the Town Council makes with respect to adopting the FTR proposal. The report will also include the recommended changes to the other sections of the Charter that do not deal with the FTM directly.

At its next meeting on January 17, the CRC will wrap up discussion of the recommendations for Charter revisions that do not deal directly with the FTM and review a draft of its final report.

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 17, 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).