CHARTER REVIEW COMMITTEE

COMMITTEE MEETING

~ AGENDA ~

Tuesday, February 7, 2023	**5:30 PM**	**Remote Meeting**

Charter Review Committee

A communication was received from Project Manager, Personnel Anna Corning, transmitting the Agenda.

City of Cambridge

COF 2023 #24
IN CITY COUNCIL
February 7, 2023

A PUBLIC MEETING OF THE CAMBRIDGE CHARTER REVIEW COMMITTEE

February 7, 2023, @ 5:30 p.m.
REMOTE ONLY – VIA ZOOM

Pursuant to Chapter 20 of the Acts of 2022 adopted by Massachusetts General Assembly and approved by the Governor, this meeting will be REMOTE ONLY via ZOOM.

The zoom link is: https://cambridgema.zoom.us/j/83253118929
Meeting ID: 832 5311 8929
One tap mobile +13092053325,,83253118929# US

Agenda Items – Tuesday, February 7, 2023

I. Roll Call

II. Introduction by Chair, Kathy Born

III. Meeting Materials Submitted to the Committee to be placed on file
- Communications from Committee Members
- Communications from Council Members
- Communications from the Public
- Other Meeting Materials

IV. Public Comment
- Members of the public are invited to share their ideas or comments with the committee.

V. Review Collins Center memo on elections article with example changes
- **Facilitator**: Mike/Libby & Anna **Goal**: Review and discuss possible revisions for the election section

VI. Round Table Discussion
- **Facilitator**: Anna. **Goal**: How has your perspective on manager vs mayor shifted as a result of the information and presentations from the last several meetings? What questions and information do you still need to form a decision?

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Cambridge Charter Review

Tim Russell <trussell@mit.edu>

Wed 1/25/2023 2:52 PM

To: Cambridge Charter Review Committee <CharterReviewCommittee@Cambridgema.gov>

Dear Charter Review Committee,
I am writing as a Cambridge resident and voter. I ask that the committee does not suggest revisions to the charter that remove our current system of ranked choice, at-large council members.

Before I moved to Cambridge, I had not experienced ranked choice voting. Now I believe it works well and provides several significant benefits.

- Ranked Choice Voting gives you more say in who gets elected. Even if your top choice candidate does not win, you can still help choose who does.
- More civility and less negative campaigning. Candidates who are not your top choice still need your support. This encourages candidates to appeal to a city-wide audience. Candidates know this and both work and campaign together. It is great to see and great for Cambridge. Such a breath of fresh air.
- More diverse and representative candidates win elections. Cambridge has elected more women and more women of color. Our elected officials are more representative of our community.
- More focus on city-wide solutions and not hyper local issues. I watch Somerville and how wards fight for resources instead of work together for the city and do not want that for Cambridge.
- At-large council seats are more competitive than ward-based ones. In Somerville, 4 out of 7 of the ward councilors ran unopposed. I fear that my ward, North Cambridge, would become the fiefdom of one elected official and no longer have the attention of the other city council members.

Please do not suggest removing part of what makes Cambridge elections so vital, invigorating, and important. The Balkanization of our politics should not be the direction that Cambridge moves. It would be a step backward.

All the best,
Tim Russell, North Cambridge – 69 Harvey Street

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Charter review comments

Christopher Cassa <cassa@mit.edu>
Fri 1/27/2023 6:14 PM

To: Cambridge Charter Review Committee <CharterReviewCommittee@Cambridgema.gov>

Dear Cambridge Charter Review Commission,

I am writing to express my appreciation for your review of the city charter and to offer my thoughts on a switch to a ward-based system.

A ward-based system would lead to less focus on city-wide solutions. For example, housing, school, and transportation policies are all examples of issues that impact the entire city and should be considered at the city level. For example, housing policies such as affordable housing and rent control affect residents across the city, not just in specific wards. Similarly, school policies such as funding for school renovations and new programming (e.g. pre-K) have a city-wide impact and should be considered at the city level. Transportation considerations naturally affect many people throughout the city and optimal solutions rely on participation from every ward.

Councilors should have a broad understanding of the benefits and impacts of these programs which affect the entire city, rather than being focused on the more narrow interests of a particular ward.

Additionally, a ward-based system would likely lead to **less democratic accountability and less political engagement**. In our neighboring city, Somerville, 4 out of 7 of the ward councilors ran unopposed. This lack of competition would not force councilors to stay in touch with voters and be held accountable. This lack of competition also makes it harder for citizens to hold their elected officials accountable and decreases political engagement.

Another important point is that **a ward-based system could lead to fewer renters being represented in the city council**. As many renters move more frequently than owners, it would make it much harder for councilors who needed to move, particularly if they moved to a different ward, to continue to be elected. This would likely lead to a council that is less representative of the city's population as a whole.

Thank you for your time and consideration.

Best Regards,
Christopher Cassa

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Wards are a bad election approach

Itamar Turner-Trauring <itamar@itamarst.org>

Fri 1/27/2023 8:17 PM

To: Cambridge Charter Review Committee <CharterReviewCommittee@Cambridgema.gov>

Dear Charter Review Committee,

Since the idea of wards has come up, I would like to strongly urge you to not pursue that path, and stick to our current ranked choice election system. Here's why:

Wards discriminate against renters:

- **Renters who are city council members may lose their seat simply because they have to find a new apartment.** We recently saw one council member, Councilor Azeem, have a really difficult time finding a new place to live; if he had been forced into a different ward, he'd be out of a job with a ward system. Ward councilors basically can't be renters and keep the job for long given Cambridge's tough rental market. Since renters are the majority of the city, setting up an election system that is heavily biased against candidates from those 60% of residents is extremely undemocratic.
- **Ward councilors are incentivized to pay less attention to renters.** When I was a renter, I lived in 6 different apartments over 10 years, living in three different neighborhoods in Cambridge. Under the current system, a vote is a vote, regardless of where I live in Cambridge; from the councilors' perspective I wasn't that much different than a homeowner. With a ward system, however, my voice would have counted much less as a renter, because there'd be a decent chance I'd move into a new ward the next year. So however well-meaning councilors are, the electoral incentives push them towards paying more attention to homeowners who will stay in the same neighborhood for longer.

  It's true the same effect applies to renters right now due to people moving across town boundaries, but it's a much weaker effect: I stayed in Cambridge the whole time, even as I kept moving. And insofar as it's a problem now, it'd be vastly worse with wards.

As someone who is now a homeowner, it's very clear the city cares a lot about property owners (consider our tax policy's focus on low taxes). And that's fine for me, but it's less good for the majority who are renters. A ward system would likely make policies even more imbalanced.

And, yes, you can have a few at-large councilors, but remember renters are the majority. A ward system that has a majority of council spots biased against the 60% of the population who are renters is bad, even if it's mitigated by at-large spots. Why have mitigation when we already have a better system?

Wards are *worse* at geographic representation than our current system

One argument for wards is that people want someone from their neighborhood to represent them. The problem is that ward boundaries don't necessarily correspond well to what people consider their neighborhood. They are by their nature arbitrary, and tied to equalizing population counts, not local problems or concerns.

With our current system, that's fine—a councilor who wants to represent some group of people in a specific geographic area can do so, and many of our councilors have core groups of support that are geographic, as Councilor Toomey did for many years. It's possible to get geographic support

from multiple areas, however: my impression is Councilor Toner got a lot of support in both North and East Cambridge. Councilors don't need to stick to arbitrary ward boundaries.

Minority groups only get ward representation if they live in the same area

On a variety of dimensions (Black residents, public housing residents, immigrants, students) there are groups that may want representation but are not the majority in any particular ward. Do you really want a system that prevents them from getting representation? And yes, you can solve this by having some at-large councilors... because at-large councilors are a better system (at least with our voting system).

Why switch to a system where only small of the seats are good at-large seats, and the rest are discriminatory in multiple dimensions?

Non-competitive races

If you get elected to the House or Senate in MA, you quite possibly have that job for as long as you want it, you're impossible to replace. In contrast, on the council we regularly have incumbent councilors lose their seats. This includes some that I supported, and some that I opposed—this isn't about my personal preferences. As a result, under our current system councilors are far more motivated to listen to constituents compared to state representatives, who know they merely have to be OK enough to keep getting re-elected.

Our current system: superior on all dimensions to ward-based systems

Contrast all the above problems with wards to our current system:

- A ranked choice system doesn't waste votes like a majority-based system. When my #1 vote didn't make it in, that was sad but OK, my vote went to my #2 vote. You could do ranked choice for wards, which is better than nothing, but ward councilors often run unopposed, at which point ranked choice is irrelevant.
- Councilors can shape unique coalitions, which can be geographical, ideological, demographic, or more commonly a combination of many factors.
- Everyone's vote is worth pursuing, whether it's renters or homeowners (there are still biases towards homeowners, but much less so than wards).
- Councilors need to keep constituents in mind, and can't just coast once they're elected.

It's not a perfect system, it still has flaws, it's still biased towards wealthier homeowners—but it's far superior to a ward-based system.

How might we improve it? Here are some ideas, premised on the idea that the main problem not the council election method (which is really pretty good) but other barriers elsewhere:

- Remove money from election campaigns: city-funded campaigns might make for more equitable outcomes.
- Switch elections to even-numbered years, so we get more voter engagement in local elections.
- Allow non-citizens to vote.
- Separate city voter registration from state/federal voter registration, so more people register for municipal elections even if they want to preserve their state/federal votes for places elsewhere that are less lop-sided.

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Itamar Turner-Trauring

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keep the current election system

Ryan Houlette <houlette@gmail.com>

Sat 1/28/2023 10:30 AM

To: Cambridge Charter Review Committee <CharterReviewCommittee@Cambridgema.gov>

Dear members of the committee,

I'm writing in support of the current Cambridge system for electing city councillors using ranked-choice voting for at-large councillors. It promotes healthy competition for seats, as opposed to ward-based systems where candidates are more likely to have little or no competition in their ward. It also forces councillors to consider the needs of the city as a whole rather than the narrow needs of their ward. This discourages NIMBYism and allows the city to enact broader, longer-term policies for the overall good of the city that would never be prioritized at the ward level.

Thank you for your consideration.

Sincerely,
Ryan Houlette
11 Newman St

Statement of John Pitkin of 18 Fayette Street, Cambridge at the public meeting of the Charter Review Committee held on January 24, 2023

Our City Charter determines the structure of our local democracy but does not by itself determine how well or poorly it functions, whether it is weak or strong. These outcomes are determined also by the behavior of public officials, both elected and appointed, and by the actions of citizens within that structure -- in short on the norms, culture and the institutions that support democracy.

If strong democracy is the ideal, and I believe that most Cantabridgians would agree that it is, then a logical component of a thorough Charter Review would be an evaluation of how well our local democracy is working, what its weaknesses are, and how these might be improved by a modified charter and structure.

You might start by asking, by what standard should we evaluate the state of our local democracy?

In the past, town government, by direct vote of the people, was considered the ideal form of government. This was the view of the Cambridge Chronicle looking back in 1921 on the 75th anniversary of Cambridge's original 1846 City Charter. "Government by representatives is far less desirable, but necessary when a municipality outgrows the other method." But "the town had become so large that it was not convenient to have the voters together in one hall to decide what the town should do."

The aspirational ideal of direct democracy is not a practical standard for a modern city. The *5 Elements of a Strong Democracy* published by the Center for High Impact Philanthropy at the University Pennsylvania is more useful for this purpose.

Among these elements are:

1. **The right of citizens to be informed and for policymakers and fellow citizens to engage with them proactively in the democratic process.**
    - We might ask if the "community meetings" held by city officials *proactively engage citizens in the democratic process*. Are they "of, by, and for the people?
    - Are Proportional Representation elections and the requirement to evaluate multiple candidates a barrier to informed participation in municipal elections?
2. **Accountability of policy-making institutions through checks and balances.**
    - We might ask if *accountability* is possible without a local press serving as watchdog.
    - Do appointed boards, commissions and advisory committees provide *checks and balances*?
    - Are municipal employees *accountable* to citizens or only to the managers who hire them?
3. **Policies that weigh all citizens' interests equally, provide for the common good, and support institutions including local neighborhood organizations that empower individuals to exercise their rights.**
    - We might ask if City Councilors who depend on a relatively small faction of voters for their re-election serve the *common good*.

- How are neighborhood interests for parks, trees, ecosystems, streets and other local infrastructure supported without ward representation?

4. **Information and communication that are representative, accurate and trusted – to ensure fair and optimal processes.**
    - The City met this standard with information about public health during the recent pandemic.
    - We might ask why relevant information about the tree canopy, bicycle safety, parking, and housing needs falls short of this standard if it is provided at all. Do the growing number of public information officials on City staff provide *information and communication that are representative, accurate and trusted?* If not, what purpose do they serve?
5. **A shared sense of purpose and identity implicit in the phrase "We the people," recognition of all citizens' right to a voice in the political process, and a willingness to collaborate for common ends.**
    - We might ask if our *shared sense of purpose and identity* is undermined when nonresidents regularly participate in public meetings on an equal basis with residents.
    - How can government bring citizens out of special-interest, social-media silos to *collaborate for common ends*?
    - Is a low tax rate our only *common end* or do we also have common goals for housing, public safety, climate, and the environment that affect us all?
6. **A sixth element of democracy, in addition to those identified in the UPenn Center,is the rule of law, which is widely recognized,** e.g., by the United Nations

(https://www.un.org/en/chronicle/article/rule-law-and-democracy-addressing-gap-between-policies-and-practices)

- We might ask how laws are enforced on our City government when the administration or City Council violate or ignore them.
- Did the 28-year absence of a Board of Traffic and Parking, required by Chapter 455 of the Massachusetts Acts of 1961, effectively deprive residents of a check on the authority of the Director of Traffic and the possibility of appeal of his/her exclusive power to regulate traffic and parking?

The charter review is rare occasion to improve democracy and government in Cambridge. I urge your committee to evaluate our local government as it has functioned under Plan E and, where there are structural flaws that can be addressed by the charter, to propose appropriate reforms.

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Comment for 1/31/23 Charter Review Committee - Need for strict compliance.

Young Kim <ycknorris@gmail.com>

Tue 1/31/2023 1:58 PM

To: Cambridge Charter Review Committee <CharterReviewCommittee@Cambridgema.gov>

Cc: City Clerk <cityclerk@Cambridgema.gov>

Dear Chairwoman Born and Members of the Charter Review Committee,

I apologize for not voicing my comments on the Charter reforms until now even though I have been calling for reforms in the way the City is governed. And I also apologize if this subject has already been discussed.

Time after time, I brought up cases of City's non-compliance:

- not following State statue's (Chapter 40B Guideline; Has City submitted Action Plan to in accordance to MBTA Communities law?)
- not following City's Ordinance (Changing scope and timeline of Cycling Safety Ordinance (CSO) without proper procedure); procedures (ISD doesn't have procedure for accepting Comprehensible Permit application);
- not following up on its own initiatives (no final report for Cambridge's ambitious 2020 goal of reducing the ratio of cars owned by Cantabrigians)
- lack of accountability of cost of projects (no way to generate a report of all contracts related to CSO implementation; City Managers estimate of the cost of MassAve4 Project approved on 4/25/22 is inconsistent with proposed budget he submitted at the following week's City Council meeting; the scope of MassAve4 as defined in the CSO that he reported had added scope of two segments of Mass Ave previously implemented)
- lack of transparency (many requests for explanations/clarifications on the CSO implementation have gone unanswered)
- lack of traceability (contract management; measuring effectiveness of SeeSlickFix and correcting deficiencies)

I do not know what the solution is to bring about the reforms to address the above and I hope you can incorporate the solution in your final report to the City Council. I am more than happy and willing to discuss these issue in detail,

Respectfully,

Young Kim

Norris Street