

Charter Revision Commission Press Release

For Immediate Release

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August 17, 2023, Ridgefield, CT; -- Now it will be up to the voters. The Board of Selectmen (BOS) voted to accept all 58 suggested changes to the Town Charter (our Town's governing document) from the Charter Revision Commission (CRC). The CRC recommended these changes after eight months of public outreach, research, and discussion. These suggested changes will go to voters in the upcoming November election.

Most of the recommendations are procedural or technical in nature, such as clarifications in wording or updated references to State statutes. Those changes are likely to be bundled into a few ballot questions. Some of the recommendations are more notable and may be presented as separate ballot questions.

Elected versus Hired: Residents will vote on whether the positions of Town Clerk, Tax Collector, and Treasurer should change from 'elected' to 'hired as Town employees.' Advocates for the change distinguish between roles that make policy, which they say should be elected positions, and roles that administer policies, which they say should be hired positions. Designating these three administrative roles as 'hired' would allow the Board of Selectmen to require credentials in training, education, and /or experience when hiring. The Board would have a wider geographic area to draw from as residency would not be required as it is for elected positions. Not subjecting people to running in elections might also increase the applicant pool. Hiring, rather than electing, would also result in more accountability, as the Board would have the option to remove people if they were not performing their duties. As BOS member Maureen Kozlark noted, "The impetus for changing this in the Charter is not a political issue. It's a competency, employment, and qualifying issue, and it's important for our government."

Advocates for preserving the positions as elected want to keep those choices directly in the hands of voters. Municipalities across the State vary in how they select their town clerks, tax collectors, and treasurers. There are no right-or-wrongs, just what is right for Ridgefield.

Gender-neutral Language: The recommendation to use gender-neutral language would not change our Town Meeting/Board of Selectmen form of government. But, if approved by voters, wording in the Charter, meetings, correspondence, and reporting would change titles such as 'chairman' to 'chair', 'Board of Selectmen' to 'Board of Selectpersons', and 'First Selectman' to 'First Selectperson.'

Although it's not a material change, the topic generated lengthy discussions among members of both the CRC and BOS. Before voting, Selectmen Sean Connelly noted, "It's the right direction."

Standards of Conduct: Perhaps the lengthiest Charter change would be a reworking of its existing Standards of Conduct to make them stronger and clearer without becoming onerous. In that reworking, the CRC received valuable input from members of the last Charter Revision Commission, the current chair of the Town's Board of Ethics, and Town counsel. According to CRC member Todd Zagorec, the recommended language "would be easier to understand and apply." He noted that writing rules on ethics is difficult because so much of it comes down to judgment. "We tried to make it more objective," said Zagorec, adding, "We don't want to discourage people from volunteering on boards."

Now that the BOS has accepted the CRC's recommendations, they will work with the Town Clerk and Town counsel on crafting the ballot questions for November.

Apart from the Charter changes, the CRC recommended that the BOS consider creating two new advisory committees in response to requests and concerns it received during the revision process:

- **Information Technology Advisory Committee** to provide advice and guidance on Town information technology matters. Once the committee is established and running smoothly with the Town's IT professionals, it could be considered for inclusion in a future Charter revision.
- **Form of Government Advisory Committee** to research whether alternatives or enhancements to the current Town Meeting/Board of Selectmen form of government would better serve the current and future needs of residents. Early in the Charter revision process, the Board of Selectmen suggested that the CRC explore whether the Town should have a Town Administrator or Town Manager. Additionally, a few residents questioned whether the Town Meeting is still the most effective form of government for Ridgefielders. The CRC believes these are important questions, but it did not have adequate time to give the questions due consideration given their magnitude.

A copy of the August 12, 2023 Charter Revision Commission Final Report is posted on the CRC page of the Town's website (ridgefieldct.gov). Printed copies of the final report are available at Town Hall and the library. Minutes, recordings of meetings, and press releases are also posted on the website. Additionally, the CRC has given digital copies of all of its records to the Town for archiving.

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