

**CHARTER REVIEW COMMISSION
CITY OF SARATOGA SPRINGS
MONDAY, SEPTEMBER 11, 2000
CITY COUNCIL ROOM
6:30 P.M.**

PRESENT: Harvey Fox, Chair Mia Mouzon
 Rita Balmuth Lee Nelson
 Lew Benton Denise Polit, Vice Chair
 Vassar Curtis Elio Del-Sette
 Mark Lawton Christopher Whann, Secretary
 Margie VanMeter

STAFF PRESENT: Anthony J. Izzo, Assistant City Attorney

CALL TO ORDER

Harvey Fox, chair, called the meeting to order at 6:30 p.m.

ROUND TABLE DISCUSSION

Margie VanMeter said she would like to begin to make a list of what should and should not be included in the charter. She said we should begin to mark off sections that should be retained. She said accountability of the city government needs to be reviewed. She said the City needs a policy making body. She said the Commission should continue to look at other forms of government though and continue to conduct interviews which include experts in this type of government.

Lew Benton said the presentations/interviews to date have been beneficial, however, he felt there still needed to be some public input. He said some City employees also need to be interviewed. He said it is very likely that there are some things that could be purged from the existing charter. He noted that there are sections that are simply being ignored, i.e., capital register. He said in other cases, the Council chooses to work outside of the charter, i.e., transfer of building inspector department. He said the existing budget process discourages public input. He said the 2000 census information will also be helpful to the Commission. He said the Commission should take advantage of the community's expertise.

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Chris Whann said he had been reading the federalist papers and while reading those papers began to wonder how they addressed their concerns as well as how they convinced others that they had good ideas. He said he felt the Commission was at an awkward moment. He said there is tension between accountability and efficiency in city government. He said there are likely other forms of government that could be more efficient, but quite possibility were less likely to be accountable. He said resolution needs to be brought forth to the public in such a way that they feel they have been heard. He too agreed they need to hear from the citizens of the community. He said Commissioner Thomas McTygue made a good point when he said that the citizens are not asking for change. Chris Whann said though if the citizens want change, the Commission must listen.

Mia Mouzon said she felt she had acquired a lot of information from the Commissioners. She said she would like to see a list developed of sections that members like and dislike and the reasons for those dislikes. She said in her conversations with members of the community, citizens doubt that there will be any change. She said people seem to be comfortable with this government. She said she would like to see a nonpartisan form of government.

Rita Balmuth agreed that accountability is needed. She said the Mayor's position needed to be looked at, i.e., full time/part time or a deputy. She said those portions of the charter that are obsolete need to be removed. She said it was unlikely that there would be Council support for major changes. She said she did not believe that the Commissioners were quite forthcoming in their presentations. She too said she would like to hear from citizens. She said the list of guest speakers as presented is a good beginning point, however, there needs to be more and suggested that people such as Mike Biffer and Geoff Bornemann be invited to speak.

Lee Nelson said she agreed with much of what had already been said. She said perhaps some information on the comprehensive review plan should be presented. She said she felt there was not much discussion outside of City Hall or this Commission on this subject and it was important that the Commission know what the community wants and whether their concerns can be met through charter revision. She said she wanted accessibility, accountability and efficiency from the City.

Mark Lawton said charters are meant to empower those who will be held accountable, however, it is difficult to get accountability in some cases. He said issues to be looked at included financial/budget, personnel, infrastructure, capital planning, etc. He said the charter is not meant to and should not be used to punish people. He said the charter needs to make it possible for the City to meet the needs of the citizens.

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Elio Del-Sette said he agreed with most of the statements made by Commission members. He said the Commission needs to get this work done and present it to the voters. He too agreed that accountability, effectiveness and efficiency need to be improved. He said this Commission needs to sell any changes and needs to sell those changes effectively over the next 14 months. He urged Commission members to leave the charter alone. He said he did not feel that there was any zeal throughout the community for sweeping changes. He said that he Commission should not fumble around by reviewing other charters. He said this is the best the City has and we should simply improve on it.

Denise Polit said she felt there was a lack of direction at this point. She said she was not sure the Commission should make minor modifications, major modifications or somewhere in between. She said she believed if a brand new government was to be formed, this form would likely not be used. She said she also felt if there were major modifications to the charter it would be unlikely the voters would approve those changes. She said at this point, she felt a clear sense of where the Commission needs to go should be established.

Vassar Curtis agreed it was not likely that major changes to the charter would be approved. He said there are many gray areas in the charter that should be reviewed though. He said specifically, the personnel question has come up several times. He said there was also some concern about Council members having both legislative and managerial duties. He said perhaps some of the Council positions might be better served as full time positions. He questioned whether term limits should be considered. He also wondered whether the rise of all of the neighborhood associations is due in part to the reaction to the lack of response from the City government. He said we need input from both the community and the political parties on this matter. He said he would like to see a balance of presenters between academia and government employees. He said perhaps someone from Mechanicville should be asked to make a presentation. He said although that government is slightly different, it might be helpful to listen to their thoughts.

Harvey Fox said he was impressed by the comments expressed by the Commission members. He said he initially felt when appointed to the Commission that the work to be done was a very big task. He said although he still feels it is a big task, he felt the work could be accomplished. He asked for Commission members' thoughts on identifying which direction the Commission should go. He said the Commission could make minor modifications, major modifications or somewhere in between. He said he still felt that further education was needed and more guest speakers should be asked to come in. He said many forms of government should be looked at and Commission members should become knowledgeable before making decisions. He agreed a list of positive and negatives should be drawn up.

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Chris Whann agreed expert speakers were still need. He said this charter needs to be responsive to the citizens of the community. He said efficiency depends in great part on who is running the City. He said terms such as accountability, efficiency, accessibility, effectiveness and responsiveness were all good terms for Commission members to think about.

Lew Benton said if it was up to him he would abandon this form of government, however, it was unlikely that sweeping change would be adopted. He said it was clear that policy issues need to be addressed and it was unfortunate that all too often the Council gets bogged down with everyday procedural type questions. He said he was concerned that this Commission did not deliver a document that would surely be dismissed by the Council. He said some public debate should also be considered. He said he was concerned about identifying a direction at this point and then being accused by individuals or organizations that they have jumped to a decision too quickly.

Elio Del-Sette said it was clear to him that if there was a direction to head in, it would be to amend the charter. He said if the Commission was to identify its direction early on in the process, perhaps support could then be garnered from the Council and the public.

Mark Lawton said it would be a mistake to establish a direction at this point. He said members need more time and more knowledge.

Denise Polit agreed there was a lot more work, but wondered what everyone else's opinions were.

Mark Lawton said there seemed to be agreement that the current system is unsatisfactory.

Harvey Fox said he was not suggesting a binding vote this evening but rather just a sense of Commission members opinions.

Lee Nelson asked if the current form of government could be maintained, but a city manager employed. Tony Izzo said there are many versions that could be reviewed.

Margie VanMeter said it seemed to her that many people had expressed that a full time Mayor might be needed.

Denise Polit suggested that perhaps a survey be drafted. Commission members agreed.

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Mia Mouzon asked if in establishing a full time Mayor, would that provide for more efficiency and could that cost be offset.

Lew Benton said the needs should be first identified and then what is lacking in order to meet those needs. He said this is a frugal form of government, however, there are some problems with the budget process. He asked what might be accomplished with a full time Mayor and what are the unmet needs of that office.

Vassar Curtis said the caliber of individuals that might be interested in running for Mayor would likely change if this was a full time position.

Mark Lawton said empowerment was the key issue. He said items such as infrastructure, personnel and budget were all items that need further review. He said though he did not want to cripple the City government. He said this government, despite everything, has been successful due in great part to the volunteers.

Lew Benton said there appeared to be a conflict between the legislative and managerial duties. He said he felt making a commissioner full time could only aggravate the situation. He said Commissioners should function as legislators and he would discourage making them full time.

Margie Van Meter said she was bothered that this type of government has fostered only two women on the Council. She said for example, she would like to run for the Council, however, she did not feel she was knowledgeable enough to hold the position of Commissioner of DPS or DPW. She said there should be department heads that report to the Council. She said she was frustrated there are no policy discussions at the Council table. She said she felt the Council should also be involved with the comprehensive plan.

It was agreed more roundtable discussions would be held next week.

Elio Del-Sette asked how the names of the individuals to be interviewed were derived. Harvey Fox said the names were a list of individuals with expertise in this area and no significance should be placed on the order of the interview.

It was agreed that Erwin Levine would be invited to attend the Monday, September 18 meeting at 7:00 p.m. for a presentation.

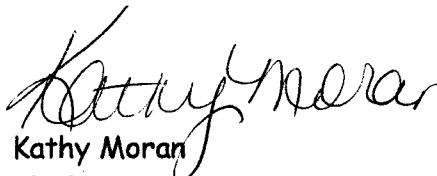
Margie VanMeter moved and Lee Nelson seconded to authorize Denise Polit, Chris Whann, Mia Mouzon and Margie VanMeter to draft a survey. Ayes all.

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ADJOURNMENT

Vassar Curtis moved and Margie VanMeter seconded to adjourn the meeting at 8:10 p.m. Ayes all. There being no further business, Harvey Fox adjourned the meeting at 8:10 p.m.

Respectfully submitted,


Kathy Moran
Clerk

Approved: 9/18/00