

**CHARTER REVIEW COMMISSION
CITY OF SARATOGA SPRINGS
MONDAY, SEPTEMBER 25, 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 Mark Lawton
 Elio Del-Sette Chris Whann
 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.

APPROVAL OF AUGUST 30, 2000 & SEPTEMBER 11, 2000, MEETING MINUTES

Chris Whann moved and Rita Balmuth seconded to approve the September 18, 2000, meeting minutes with a few minor corrections. Ayes all.

OUTREACH PROGRAM

Mark Lawton said he had spoken with Dean Thompson, SUNY, and he was willing to circulate a memo to graduate students in Albany inviting them to do an internship working with the charter commission and he was also willing to make a presentation at one of our meetings. Mark Lawton said Frank Mauro and Todd Swanstrom were also willing to make presentations.

ROUNDTABLE DISCUSSION

Margie VanMeter distributed information based on her notes for items that need to be reviewed/changed/eliminated in the charter. She also distributed a list of individuals that perhaps should be invited to make presentations to the Commission. Harvey Fox asked that members review this information home and be prepared to discuss it next week.

Margie VanMeter also reported that she had called the school district and spoke to Janice White about the possibility of members of the Commission making presentations to classes about the Commission's work. Janice White said these presentations could be tied to the curriculum and

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suggested it be done closer to election time. Mark Lawton said the brochure that is being developed might have enough of the basic information on the Commission's work and the City government to be distributed in the classroom

Rita Balmuth said she was somewhat concerned that if Commission members used this handout, it in some way reflects that the Commission is moving toward minor modification of the charter rather than a complete change. Chris Whann disagreed. Harvey Fox said he had asked Tony Izzo to present by the end of October a recap on what the commission had discussed to date on his recommendations for some changes to the charter.

A.C. RILEY PRESENTATION

Harvey Fox introduced A. C. Riley reminding everyone that she had served on the 1968 charter review commission, served as the City's representative to the County Board of Supervisors and also served as Mayor.

A. C. Riley said when she served on the 1968 charter review commission there was somewhat of a consensus that the commission form of government should be changed. She said although this form of government had served the City well, there were likely other forms that could do just as well.

She said she would like to see a legislative council, which sets policy, and is not specifically responsible for any department. She said there are a lot of good, quality people living in this community, that might like to run for office; however, they may not feel qualified enough to run a department. She said although Council members appoint a deputy, it is often difficult to find a quality individual for those types of positions. She said the existing work schedule and pay is not sufficient to support having a Council member in the building at all times, which leaves individuals such as retirees or self-employed individuals who have the time for such positions.

A. C. Riley said this form of government was created in this City as a reaction to a disaster which happened in Texas. She said it has served the City well, but it is time for a change. She suggested that the Commission think about going to seven members simply because of the open meeting law.

She said with a seven-member Council, committees could be established to review pertinent items/issues. She said she would like to see a legislative council with the general interests of the City at heart. She also said she would like to see them elected at large.

A. C. Riley said this form of government promotes "turfism". She said at times it is difficult to cooperate with another commissioner who is committed to defeating you in the next election. She said some form of central administration with a city manager or strong mayor should be considered.

She said with a strong mayor though that individual would need to give up their full time employment and be compensated appropriately by the City.

A. C. Riley said the average person on the street simply does not understand this government. She said it is extremely difficult for out of town individuals who are trying to do business in this City.

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She said because of the fragmentation in City Hall, the City gets many complaints about not being user friendly. She suggested that thought be given to creating a personnel department. She said departments such as civil service, payroll, benefits, etc, should be placed in one department. She said she would like to see department heads/deputies selected because of their ability. She pointed out that under the existing charter there is really no review of deputies and/or their responsibilities. She said she was not sure though whether they should be exempt or not.

A. C. Riley said a legislative council could be responsive to community's wishes. She suggested that thought be given to a "consent" agenda, whereas routine items would not appear before the Council. She suggested that thought be given to raising the \$1,000 purchasing limit.

A. C. Riley said although it is important for supervisors to stay in touch with the Council, she did not feel they should report to the Council. She said supervisors are elected by the voters not the council. She pointed out that the County Board of Supervisors deals with issues that are very different from the City (administering state and federal programs, health programs, jail, sheriff, etc.). She said a representative to that Board is at a different "level" than the City government. She said she did not support having a member of the Council serve as a representative to the County Board.

Harvey Fox asked how the 1968 commission dealt with getting the word out on what that Commission was doing. A. C. Riley said that *The Saratogian* had a great deal of support for the commission in 1964 and 1968 and surmised that is why the public was so well informed. She also pointed out that in 1968, the League of Women Voters supported charter change. She said the League of Women Voters even developed a brochure which was distributed.

Denise Polit asked why A. C. Riley thought that their recommendations were not approved by the voters. A. C. Riley said at that time there was a group of very influential "old time" Saratogians, who did not support this change. She said that group, purchased a full page ad in *The Saratogian*, and signed their names to the ad. She said she suspected that influenced a lot of people. Denise Polit asked what she thought this commission could do to make it easier. A. C. Riley suggested a speakers bureau, compiling compelling arguments, going out to as many community organizations as possible, etc. She said this Commission needs to demonstrate to the community that a change to this government can be both better and more economical for the City.

Lew Benton said there are only a small handful of truly political appointments in the City. He said he agreed with A. C. Riley in that this form of government should be abandoned but was concerned at how successful that would be with the voters next year. He said he personally did not support the use of a city manger. Lew Benton said if this form of government is salvaged there is a compelling need for a personnel department. He asked A. C. Riley if she had any thoughts on what should be included. He pointed out that there has not been a capital budget since A. C. Riley left office and asked whether there should be some changes in that area, i.e., another office compiling that data. A. C. Riley said the budget process could be done differently, however, there was some reluctance by commissioners to look at the big picture. She said when she was the Mayor a five-

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year capital register was developed, however, it was not taken seriously. She said it is a serious issue though that needs to be completed so that the City can better plan. She said the City needs to be realistic in its planning, i.e., the long term water supply source is an issue that will require a great deal of money as well as planning and, therefore, should be included in the capital register. She said the current form of government does not allow for those types of long range discussion.

She said if the council had the time and inclination to discuss policy, share, talk, and decide collectively, it could function better. She said as the current form of government exists, commissioners are reluctant to look into issues that do not fall under their own department.

Mark Lawton asked if the existing budget process allows for prioritization of capital projects. A. C. Riley said not really. She said each department brings forth their own budget requests and then it is voted on. She said the Finance Commissioner can mold it to a certain point. She said depending on the Finance Commissioner, the budget could be reviewed line by line in great detail, or simply the revenues could be looked at and a budget developed from that angle. She said both of those ways work, however, she wondered whether the community truly benefitted from those approaches.

A. C. Riley said a compelling argument for maintaining the existing form of government is that the City has kept a tight belt. She said though that Commissioners never truly have a global sense of the budget, but rather only their own individual budget. She said perhaps with another form of government, this information might flow more freely.

Mark Lawton said in the existing charter there is a provision on reporting. He said if those reports were completed and would they be of any use. A. C. Riley said often reports are boring, however, perhaps they should be done quarterly to keep Council members informed. Mark Lawton asked how that reporting should be enforced. A. C. Riley said she was not sure. She said the Mayor, although he/she has general oversight, does not really have the authority to ensure that they are completed.

Mark Lawton asked if the Mayor should have a deputy. A. C. Riley said yes.

Chris Whann asked what were A. C. Riley's feelings on the debt limit. A. C. Riley said she was not sure that it needs to be more ambitious. She said when adopted, it was not an unreasonable constraint. She said, though, the City is not well served in bonding smaller items and suggested that recurring items, police cars, etc. simply be added to the budget each year. She said although taxes would be somewhat higher, the public would likely understand.

Rita Balmuth asked how the existing budget could be maintained if this form of government was changed. A. C. Riley said she was not sure changing the form would increase taxes. She said there was no reason that personnel could not be shifted among departments during peak and low season times. She said the existing government does not allow for the City to utilize them in such a way.

Mark Lawton agreed that long range planning was needed. He said taxpayers are happy their taxes are low, but wondered what the consequences to the City would be for maintaining those low taxes. He asked whether A. C. Riley thought that long range planning should be included in the charter. A. C. Riley said yes.

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Denise Polit asked if the members of the 1968 charter commission were selected on their predisposition to change. A. C. Riley said no. Denise Polit asked how long it took the commission to determine that change was needed. A. C. Riley said that commission worked as this commission is doing by reviewing other charters, having individuals make presentations to them, identifying government representatives and materials that could be used, etc. She said the commission was in existence for only about one year.

Low Benton asked if the capital register should be maintained by the Mayor's Office. A. C. Riley suggested that perhaps the Finance Department could maintain that item. Low Benton asked where the City Engineer's department should be placed. A. C. Riley said she was not sure. She said since it serves both Public Safety and Public Works, she was not sure that it should be placed within either one. A. C. Riley said perhaps a centralized administration might be the answer.

Margie VanMeter said it seems that the Recreation Department does not fit into any department. She said she was surprised to learn that the Recreation Department has such a large budget, but that much of the money goes to DPW for maintaining the facilities. She asked if A. C. Riley would like to see a Recreation/Parks Department. A. C. Riley said she was not sure. She questioned whether the City really needed to take on the management of any more property.

A. C. Riley said with the existing form, the Commissioners are really running the show. She said with a legislative form, the deputy could manage the department. Mark Lawton asked if the duties of the deputies should be defined in the charter. A. C. Riley said they could, however, thought that with this form, the Commissioners would really still be running the department. Mark Lawton asked if the Council was increased from five to seven, what departments should be created. A. C. Riley said perhaps a Recreation Department, Economic Development and Planning, etc. Mark Lawton asked for what the Mayor really had "overall general responsibility". A. C. Riley said according to the charter, the Mayor has much more power than he/she uses. Mark Lawton asked if it would be helpful to expand on that definition. A. C. Riley said if the community was to call for a stronger mayor than yes the definition should be expanded.

Harvey Fox thanked A. C. Riley for her presentation.

NEXT MEETINGS

It was agreed that Geoff Bornemann, City Planner, would be asked to make a presentation at the October 2 meeting; Frank Mauro would appear on October 10 and Todd Swanstrom would appear on October 16.

Margie VanMeter asked that Tony Izzo gather together a list of the City's Boards and their functions to which the Mayor makes appointments.

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ADJOURNMENT

Elio Del-Sette moved and Chris Whann seconded to adjourn the meeting at 8:25 p.m. Ayes all.
There being no further business, Harvey Fox adjourned the meeting at 8:25 p.m.

Respectfully submitted,

Kathy Moran
Clerk

Approved: