

Charter Revision Commission

Minority Report

In 1955, the Town of Groton commissioned “Groton: Its Community Characteristics and Governments, Report of Town Government Committee Study” to examine the structure and function of municipal government. The Committee included members of the League of Women Voters, the Chamber of Commerce, and members of a taxpayer’s association among others. In the 1950s, the Town of Groton had a population of 25,000. The form of government was selectman--board of finance--town meeting. The report of the Committee of Nineteen noted that at the time Groton was, “the second largest town in Connecticut still operating under the general town meeting--board of selectmen--board of finance form of government.” The Committee also noted that with Groton being so large, at 25,000 people, the people’s’ “interests would be better served by substituting a relatively small popularly elected legislative body for the town meeting.”

The Committee of Nineteen recognized that with the growth of population “the town meeting ceases to be an effective instrument of democratic control” and that there was the need to adapt to new realities and implement a change to Groton’s government structure--an adaptation to reflect our nation’s republic with popularly elected representatives governing. “For a town meeting--board of selectmen--board of finance form of government the organization of Groton is relatively good. This form of government, however, is designed for a small town where the duties of office are simple enough to be performed adequately by part-time officials. But Groton is no longer a small town and as it continues to grow its administration will become more time-consuming and more complex. The management of the Town’s affairs will then require the full-time services of technically trained personnel.” This was in 1955. In 2017, we should not regress to a reliance on non-professionals for financial advice and guidance in the form of a board of finance. The high stakes of our current economy demand non-partisan professionals providing the advice and guidance to elected officials.

Along with the elimination of the board of finance, the Committee of Nineteen also recommended the elimination of the town meeting. When the new form of government was adopted in 1957, a system of checks and balances came into existence. The RTM serving as a check on the Town Council, with the Town Manager providing full-time, non-partisan professional management of town matters. For sixty years, Groton, with a Town Council—RTM—town

manager structure, has functioned efficiently and enjoys a hard-earned reputation as being well managed and fiscally responsible. Indeed, neighboring towns are receiving favorable press as they are just starting to implement practices that the Town of Groton has had in place for years (i.e. the fleet reserve fund to be implemented in Stonington as reported in The Day, January 26, 2017). With a population of 40,000 and the Town's revenues over \$100 million, this is not the time, nor is there a need to change the structure of Groton's government.

Keeping the RTM is in the best interest of the *whole* town of Groton. By its very nature, the body is truly representative of every corner of town. Throughout the year, the members live and work with their constituents, driving the same roads, playing at the same parks and visiting the same classrooms with their children. These elected officials are the voice of the people in each of our seven districts. Based on population, and with guaranteed minority party representation, the RTM is the essence of our republic.

Throughout the year, the RTM meets to keep apprised of town matters and in the spring the heavy lifting begins. Each member is charged with reading, questioning, and understanding the entire town budget--town departments, education, subdivisions, debt service, insurance and claims, etc. In addition to the broad scope, each member is assigned to at least one subcommittee, where they serve as an "expert" on several accounts. The job of the subcommittee is to delve into detail with the Town staff, superintendent of schools, or subdivision representative. The depth of understanding can only be achieved by this detailed analysis. Just as you send a representative to Washington, DC to tend to national matters, you send your neighbor to tend to town matters.

The informed decisions made by the RTM represent the people in every neighborhood in town, unlike a budget referendum, where a very small special interest group could form, and drive the outcome to suit their specialized needs. Every budget will be a political battle and does not need to be. In a report from the Office of Legislative Research (OLR) on Forms of Local Government, it was reported that, "between 1991 and 1997 only one town" changed forms of government. "Berlin--which changed from mayor council to council manager." (Note that this is a move to become more like Groton's current system of government, not a regressive move as are the suggested charter changes.) More pertinent to this particular point, the author expressed concerns with the perils of "a small but well-organized group having disproportionate

influence.” In fact, a speaker during the Commission’s citizen’s petitions recounted his experience with just such a small PAC.

As to the partisan composition of the RTM, it was noted in a 2005 article in The Day that, “Historically, Republicans have held the majority on the RTM.” In addition, over the past several decades, the moderator’s post and subcommittee chairs have been fairly equitably split. Not only does the RTM guarantee representation, including minority representation, for each district in the Town, the leadership roles have not stagnated and adapt to the changing political climate, all the while maintaining much needed stability in government processes.

Towns of our size, by measure of population and budget, do not have boards of finance and budget referendums. The classification system used by the Connecticut State Department of Education, District Reference Groups (DRGs), uses factors such as income, education, and poverty to classify municipalities using letter codes A through I. Groton is in DRG G which is mid-size to large towns, suburbs, slightly lower income, rate of low-income students above DRG F, and the 3rd highest in single parent households. (For comparison purposes, the highest DRG is I for big cities like New Haven; with Stonington, a DRG C--mid-size suburban, 3rd highest income and education levels.) Only four municipalities in our DRG have referendum--East Windsor, Killingly, Naugatuck and Windsor Locks. Please note that Glastonbury, which was used as a touchstone for comparisons throughout the Commission’s meetings is a DRG B--smaller rural and suburban, low poverty levels, high incomes, above average in education attainment and percent of management professionals.

At the public hearing, five people asked for the elimination of the RTM. Twenty asked for a budget referendum. Out of 17,000 registered voters.

The argument has been made that the general public is just as informed on fiscal matters as the RTM. Statistics on Town budget website hits and sale of budget books say otherwise. As an example, for the FYE 2015 budget, the total number of downloads/viewings as reported by the Town IT department was 42 clicks and 37 unique visitors. The Town Clerk’s office reported no budget books sold during that time. For comparison, as stated earlier, each of the 41 RTM members reads the budget book, then attends hours of meetings in subcommittee, followed by hours of whole RTM meetings reviewing each account in great detail, prior to any vote on any budget account.

Elections are not cheap. According to the Registrars of Voters, a municipal election in Groton costs \$22,590. A referendum in all seven districts costs \$21,740; and a referendum in only one location costs \$14,890. In an OLR document, it was stated that between 1997-2002, voters rejected budgets 236 times in 51 towns and 12 school districts. A sampling of the municipalities with rejected budgets shows that the dollar amount of change from one vote to the final ranged from \$5,800 to \$28,000. In addition to these monetary concerns, the percent of voter turnout is consistently low in budget referendums, falling below what Groton experiences for municipal elections.

In conclusion, this report outlines opposition to the elimination of the RTM; opposition to the reversion to a board of finance; and opposition to the implementation of the budget referendum. In addition, the terms of office suggested for town council are too lengthy. Term limits will constrain your pool of talent, as will barring municipal employees from serving in elected office.

Service on the Charter Revision Commission has been an honor. It has also been a valuable experience in that it was an exercise in the virtues of current town government. As outlined here, the current charter does not require the revisions suggested by the Commission.

Respectfully submitted,

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Revised 08/17/2017 to include additional signatory.