

STATEMENT ON REFERENDUM RECOMMENDATIONS
OF
CHARTER REVISION COMMISSION
August 16, 2017

We, the undersigned, do not support the introduction of an annual budget referendum into Groton's budget process. We prefer a process that is deliberative rather than political. We believe Groton's budgets should reflect town-wide needs and balance factional ones. We see substantial financial costs and practical challenges associated with conducting annual referendums.

Town meetings and budget referendums are generally devices of small town governments. It may also be said that they are a product of our oldest town governments and of a simpler time when New England towns more accurately represented genuine communities of interest and when a voice in local government required individual participation. There are 75 municipalities in Connecticut which still decide their budget by referendum. Some automatically go to referendum every year and some only by a trigger mechanism. None of these towns are as large as Groton. Among the 75 towns, 63 have populations under 20,000. The largest town with a referendum is Vernon, pop. 29,000. None are as complex governmentally as is Groton. And importantly, only 3 of the 75 municipalities have lower mill rates than Groton. (Source: CT Office of Policy and Management)

Deliberative vs Political Budget Process

These days, we are all busy people, busier than we were in the past. Many Groton taxpayers who juggle work and family, health issues, travel requirements and other commitments, do not have the ability or willingness to devote to public office or to developing a Town budget. In 1958, when it was judged that Groton had outgrown a physical Annual Town Meeting, it was replaced with a form of *representative* government, the Representative Town Meeting (RTM). This was a recognition that elected representatives could be better informed and, as a body, better able to represent the whole town. Today, we, the undersigned, have the same preference in representative government.

Town Councilors and RTM members spend hundreds of hours listening to all interests, learning the short term and longer-term needs and preferences of citizens. They volunteer and campaign to do the job. They are held accountable and chosen every two years by voters to fulfill that responsibility. They work closely with a professional staff. In public hearings, budget workshops and countless meetings, Groton's budget process has incorporated months of input from taxpayers, staff and subdivisions into Town Council and RTM decisions. This Charter Revision Commission has recommended increased public input, budgetary guidance from the new Board of Finance and from the Town Council to the Town Manager. These elected officials are highly informed when they approve the final Town budget!

We are concerned that voters in a budget referendum are not as informed and are less apt to have the whole Town in mind when they vote. Further, those who vote may not represent an accurate cross-section of Groton residents. Voters in referendum could instead reflect whichever interest group ran the best organized and funded political campaign or had the most yard signs while the priorities of non-voting residents are voiceless in a referendum.

Town-wide vs Factional Interests

Groton is not always a single, cohesive community of interest. While our diversity and strong neighborhoods are blessings, they also can result in parochial identities. We say we live in “The City”, “PQ” or Mystic rather than Groton. Residents in one section of Groton are often not impacted at all by circumstances in another part of town. It is only after much listening, learning and deliberation that elected representatives can set priorities for all of Groton. Unlike individual voters, these representatives have volunteered to listen to all citizen’s views. We believe this is the best way to ensure that all Groton residents have a voice and that Town policies serve the whole community.

Practical Challenges – Timing

This Commission’s recommendation includes a budget calendar that begins with budget workshops in January, is followed by Town staff and Board of Education work in February, Board of Finance review in March and Town Council review and adoption by April 30. In May, voters would begin to vote in budget referendums and continue to vote on amended budgets every 2 weeks until a majority votes to approve one.

Under Connecticut law, municipalities must adhere to a July 1 fiscal year. Under our current Charter, a mill rate must be set by June 9th, barely allows time for tax bills to be printed, mailed and payable starting July 1. Between mid-May and June 9, it is only possible to hold a maximum of two referendum. This Commission’s recommendation does not specify a deadline for setting a mill rate. Instead it specifies a referendum be held every two weeks until approved. If a budget is not approved by June 30th, the previous year’s budget is effective. This would be the basis for setting a mill rate and levying taxes for the first 6 months of the fiscal year. Several of problems arise: Tax bills would not arrive until sometime in July and be immediately due. Once a budget is approved and a new mill rate is set, adjusted tax bills would be sent in December prior to the second payment due date in January.

In allowing the month of May to be used for referendums, the loses the ability to know state revenues for the coming year. Without referendums, the BOF and Council reviews could take place a month later when, in normal times, the legislature has passed a budget and adjourned. The mill rate could be set when revenues are known.

Financial Costs

In 2016, our Town Registrar and Town Clerk estimated the cost of conducting a town-wide election to be \$22,590. This includes the printing of ballots and the staffing of 7 polling places. It does not include the cost of printing in newspapers the legal notices of public hearings and each budget referendum as required by law. We do not feel this is a justifiable expense for the taxpayers of Groton.

We believe all good government elicits robust public participation and we have supported measures in this revision to improve public engagement in budget development. But we also know that a system of pure democracy that *requires* each person to participate is not practical or fair. The many Groton citizens who can't vote in referenda also deserve representation. We believe the best government structure for Groton is a representative democracy. Therefore we, the undersigned oppose introduction of an annual budget referendum into Groton's budget process.

Respectfully submitted,

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