

Member Statement

Robert K. Frink

I support the recommendations of the Groton Charter Revision Commission. When taken all together the recommendations provide a very balanced approach that recognizes and strategically places the significant roles that citizens, elected leaders and professional staff contribute to efficient and effective Town Government. The recommendations specifically accomplish the following;

- Maintains the Town Council/Town Manager form of government. Town Council, sets policy for the Town, elected at-large, stays at 9 members. Town Manager executes policy and runs the town. Virtually no change to the core of our town government.
- Provides for a transparent annual budget development process including a formal setting for citizen input.
- Puts significant emphasis on budget guidance prior to budget development.
- Staff personnel maintain ownership of budget development and management of resources.
- Establishes a check point to determine if budget guidance was met in proposed budgets.
- Puts the Town Council as the final approver of the annual recommended budget.
- Gives resident voters a voice in final budget approval.
- Provides for a bifurcated budget, one for Town, one for Education.
- Provides for a Board of Finance, a stand-alone elected body, to support the Town Council in financial matters and keep the public informed.

This is how I came down on our three big recommendations, eliminate the RTM, implement an Annual Budget Referendum and implement a Board of Finance;

Eliminate the RTM

The RTM was included on the list of items the Town Council asked the Charter Revision Commission to look at. I am in favor of eliminating the RTM for the following reasons; The RTM does not function in a proactive way, it performs its duties after the Town Manager and the Town Council have acted. This is a waste of the hard work the RTM committees do and their knowledge of town government. It would be different if RTM committee work was shared with the Town Council in a formal way so it could be applied to decision making up-front, but it isn't. Second is redundancy. There is almost complete redundancy between the RTM and the Town Council. Having both bodies go through the budget using identical processes adds very little value while duplicating the use of staff resources. Third, Groton is the only town in CT, and perhaps anywhere, that has a Town Council and an RTM. The other 6 towns in CT that have an RTM include Greenwich, Darien, Westport, Fairfield, Branford and Waterford. None of them have a Town Council. For them their RTM is their legislative body. Early on I thought the way

those six towns operate might be a solution for Groton and at the October 3, 2016 meeting I did advocate for the RTM and the elimination of the Town Council. However after digging into this it became evident that many of the members of Groton's RTM are very happy meeting once a month and are not be interested in taking on the legislative role of the Town Council.

Institute an Annual Budget Referendum

From the beginning I was in-favor of recommending an Annual Budget Referendum (ABR) so the voters could finally decide on it one way or the other. Like the RTM, the issue of an ABR has been around for years and was supported by the minority of the last Charter Revision Commission in 2008. However, the majority prevailed and it never got to the voters. The ABR we are recommending has no triggering mechanism, requires no minimum voter turn-out and there's no limit to the number of votes to approve a budget. It provides for citizen feedback, asking if you vote 'NO' to answer if the proposed budget too high or is it too low? The driving idea behind this model is that citizens have the final approval on the budget with no restrictions. There's no trigger point which gives the voters a chance to reject a proposed budget because they believe it is too low. The referendum can't be gamed by constituencies staying home to keep turn-out low. There's no limit to the number of votes so that everyone knows from the beginning that the budget isn't going to pass until the citizens pass it. This requirement for mandatory citizen approval is an important factor in guiding the separation of the 'wants' from the 'needs' in the early stages of budget development and focusing our town spending on what's most important. Clinton, Cromwell, Guilford, Madison, Newtown and Stonington all operate this way. After looking at the experiences of these towns and talking to several of them I came to the conclusion that the ABR we are proposing would be a valuable component to our municipal government.

In our debates on the ABR there were a number of arguments against it. Those being that only 'NO' voters will vote; that residents will not understand what they're voting on; that Groton is too big for an ABR; and finally that we are a Republic not a pure Democracy and as such we rely on elected and appointed officials to make budget decisions for us, not the electorate at-large. These are my thoughts on these arguments;

Only ‘NO’ voters will vote; These charts show the budget referendum voting history for Stonington, CT. A town that is mentioned frequently when discussing a budget referendum for Groton. Since 2009 there have been a total of 13,760 ‘YES’ votes and 6610 ‘NO’ votes, or just over twice as many ‘YES’ than ‘NO’. For referenda on infrastructure since 2010 there have been 4804 ‘YES’ votes and 2201 ‘NO’ votes and again more than twice as many ‘YES’ votes than ‘NO’ votes. Also in 2002, a referendum on the new high school passed by 2361 to 1368 or 75% more ‘YES’ than ‘NO’. These figures seem to repudiate the belief that only ‘NO’ voters show up.

Stonington CT Referenda History Year-By-Year					Stonington CT Referenda on Infrastructure Spending			
2009 - 2017					2010 - 2015			
Year	Nbr of Referenda	YES	NO	Date Passed	Year	Item	YES	NO
2017	1	1001	422	9-May	2015	School Renovations	1496	451
2016	1	770	352	17-May	2012	Road Maintenance	1053	351
2015	1	1290	497	12-May	2012	Athletic Fields	827	530
2014	1	1722	733	6-May	2010	Waste Water Treatment	759	288
2013	1	1582	674	30-Apr	2010	Land Swap	669	581
2012	2	2802	2202	5-Jun	Total Votes		4804	2201
2011	1	1083	394	24-May				
2010	1	1135	583	6-May	2002	High School	2361	1368
2009	1	2375	753	28-Apr				
Total Votes		13760	6610					

For the towns I looked at, some budget referendums take 2 votes and a few take 3. More than 3 is rare. The most recent problems Stonington had were back in 2008 when it took 5 referendums and until August 5 to approve the budget. That was 9 years ago and hasn't happened since. Also, in the last 19 years 17 of them saw Stonington's budget approved on or before June 30.

Residents will not know what they're voting on; True, it is a challenge to inform 18,000 registered voters on the details of a \$120M budget. Communicating budget issues to the general public isn't easy, the other town's I spoke to have the same problems everyone else has. A given set of the population is difficult if not impossible to reach with budget information. However, our overall recommendations, taken together, provide many opportunities to communicate the budget process, step by step, to the citizens of Groton. It starts with the budget development schedule which is developed and issued to the public before budget development starts. Citizens are thus made aware of when key budget development steps occur and when they can participate through the conduct of budget workshops for example. These workshops are the first step in building the foundation of the budget and keeping the public aware and involved.

Communication continues through traditional public hearings and citizen petitions. Additionally the proposed Board of Finance (BOF) is intended to be an open conduit of budget information to the citizens throughout the year and can be a sounding board for citizen questions and input. Finally, the budget document itself can be presented in a format that shows the town's budget requirements and justification in ways that are readily understandable. Newtown CT's budget does a pretty good job at this. For example, page 5 of their budget document has 'A Readers Guide to the Budget'. This is a link to their 2018 budget document;

http://www.newtown-ct.gov/sites/newtownct/files/uploads/lc_budget_document_2017_2018_0.pdf

Groton is too big for an ABR: I believe this is a reference to our population and the notion that there are too many people in Groton to adequately inform about the budget or to get to the polls.

As discussed above the proposed budget process is designed to be inclusive and completely open to citizen involvement. The proposed BOF is intended to be a visible and accessible resource to the public on budget issues throughout the year. And the budget document can be presented in ways that citizens can be readily informed. Finally having an awareness of our town's operations, financial status and long range plans is an important element of our civic duty. Effort spent on getting information out, despite the perceived difficulties of size, supports this goal.

Regarding our population, Groton has about 40,000 residents. However, in counting active registered voters we have somewhere around 18,000. That compares fairly well with Newtown CT which I was told has around 17,000. In the 2015 municipal election in Groton, 4,623 citizens voted for a 28% turnout. In general, budget referendum turnout ranges from just under 10% to 30% with 15% being common. This seems very manageable to me.

Finally, based on a conversation I had with one of Groton's registrar of voters we agreed that for a budget referendum 3 polling places would be adequate and as time went on, two might be enough based on voter turn-out. As for cost, for the last national election we had 7 polling places and the cost for the entire election was just under \$30,000. That would put the cost of 3 polling places just below \$15,000 and if there were 2 polling places the cost would come down to \$10,000 or less.

We're a Republic not a pure Democracy, we elect citizens to make decisions for us; This is a great academic argument. However the reality is that budget referendums are a solid part of the fabric of almost half the communities in Connecticut. It would be hard to tell them that they're doing it wrong. Further, budget referendums function as a vote of confidence in our elected and appointed leaders just as much as a validation of the budget. This positive feedback is something our elected and appointed leaders deserve and we all benefit from knowing that our government is in sync with the citizenry.

Board of Finance

I support a Board of Finance (BOF) for Groton because I believe we need an elected body that is solely dedicated to the deep understanding of the town's financial matters and can translate that understanding to the Town Council and the public. From my personnel experience, I believe that the Town Council is not able to adequately perform this function due to the significant legislative workload placed on it. The list of pending Town Council legislative items as of December 2016 ranged from items like the Groton Long Point Bridge over Palmer's Cove, to Non-Union Terms and Conditions, the Procurement of the USS Groton Sail and Planes, the Fitch Middle School Reuse Plan, Effects of Heroin on the Community, the Use of the Recycling Building on Flanders Road for Fire Training, the Disposition of Former Colonel Ledyard School and the Department of Transportation Easement – Route 1/South Road. That's just 8 items out of 44 from the December list. Simply put the Town Council doesn't have the time to do what a Board of Finance will do.

A BOF will also be a resource to the public on the town budget and the annual budget development process. Its monthly meetings will be open to the public and will provide a forum for bringing transparency to the town's financial status. It will work cooperatively with town staff to optimize the town's overall financial oversight capability. It will create and maintain a five-year financial forecast for the town as several other BOF's in CT do including Greenwich and Darien. This is the kind of work that I believe we desperately need. This is a link to Darien's BOF 5 year forecast;

http://www.darienct.gov/filestorage/28565/31353/31355/31764/Five_Year_Forecast_for_RTM.pdf

This is a link to what the Greenwich Board of Estimate and Taxation (their BOF) issues;

<http://www.greenwichct.org/upload/medialibrary/883/Final-Budget-Guidelines-2017-2018.pdf>

Conclusion

I've heard that the changes we're recommending are too big and too much at once. I respectfully disagree. The issues of the RTM and Annual Budget Referendum are not new, we've been talking about them for many years. The Charter Revision Commission gave them a thorough going-over. For the good of all, it's time to decide, put these issues behind us and move on. Groton already has a number of Boards and Commissions, a Board of Finance will be one more of what we're already used to. And there are plenty of BOF's in CT to learn from including Stonington right next door to us. Finally if our recommendations make it to the voters and they are approved I strongly recommend that a detailed transition plan be put together to guide us from where we are today to where we will be in the future.

If nothing else this was a civics lesson for me. My research included the following other towns in CT and a couple from out of state as listed here.

Towns in Connecticut			Other Towns
Avon	Glastonbury	Newtown	East Longmeadow MA
Berlin	Greenwich	Norwich	San Luis Obispo CA
Branford	Guilford	Simsbury	Truckee CA
Clinton	Ledyard	Trumbull	
Cromwell	Madison	Waterford	
Darien	Manchester	West Hartford	
East Hampton	Mansfield		

Other references I used were the Government Finance Officers Association, 'Anatomy of a Priority Driven Budget Process'; The Connecticut Conference of Municipalities; and Sacred Heart University, 'Financial Performance in Connecticut's Municipalities: A Comparison of Manager, Mayor-Council and Selectman Forms of Government'.

I want to thank the other members of the Charter Revision Commission for their dedication to this effort over the last 15 months. Also the Town Clerk, Betsy Moukawsher and her assistant Nathan Caron for their terrific help in this effort.

Endorsements

This statement is endorsed by Charter Revision Commission Members Scott Aument, Kathy Chase, Rosanne Kotowski and Daniel Mello. Jenn White also expressed her endorsement with an exception for the Commission's recommendation for an Annual Budget Referendum which she does not endorse.