



WF CRC re:Cap #1: *November 17, 2020*

The inner-workings of Watertown’s governance were on display November 17 at the third Charter Review Committee (CRC) meeting, held virtually since the 2020 process launched on October 3. Members of the (CRC) and the general public heard Zoom presentations from:

- ▶ **Chris McClure**, the town’s new [chief information officer](#), whose slidedeck outlined plans for an improved, more interactive Watertown website. That includes a [dedicated page](#) for the charter review. Using a variety of tech tools, McClure described the movement from Watertown’s current approach to more transparent, efficient, convenient, and user-friendly civic engagement. “Constant contact drives engagement,” he said, with an enhanced strategy for two-way engagement the goal. Getting a better sense of what people are thinking and feeling will help drive better decisions, he said, and invited those with questions and ideas to email him at cmclure@watertown-ma.gov.
- ▶ **Mike Ward** and **Stephen McGoldrick**, experts from UMass Boston’s [Edward J. Collins, Jr. Center for Public Management](#), which is under contract to help the CRC carry out an effective charter review process. The Collins Center submitted 16 documents, including [a memorandum](#) of proposed next steps, a draft [timeline](#), and [other items](#) — including a [sampler of 12 charters](#) from other Massachusetts municipalities exhibiting different structures and incentives.
- ▶ **John Portz** and **Leanne Hammond**, respective chairs of Watertown’s elected [School Committee](#) and [Library Trustees](#), who shared their views on governing board *selection* (elected or appointed), including *filling vacancies*; *term length* (two or four years); and *classification* (staggered or uniform); *size* and *composition*; and *compensation* (salary and possible benefits), which can exclude those without means.

Who’s involved: The 15-member CRC includes all members of Watertown’s [Town Council](#) and six Watertown residents selected by Town Council President Mark Sideris. (A full list can be viewed on the [CRC page](#).)

Why it matters: Conducted every 10 years, the charter review process is an opportunity to discern how well we can govern ourselves so as to live well together. More specifically, that means it’s our chance to review the structure and operation of our administrative and legislative branches, laid out in Watertown’s [Home Rule Charter](#) (our “constitution”), and

Did You Know?

**Watertown was founded in 1630,
but its first Home Rule Charter
wasn’t created until 1980.**

determine how well it lives up to the changing preferences, demands, and expectations of we who live and work here.

- **THE BIG PICTURE:** Watertown has changed a lot in recent years as development has increased, businesses have come and gone and come again, and new residents have moved in. The challenge is to assure that town governance is meeting 21st century lifestyle, communication modes, and professional and environmental needs with 21st century structures, tools, and processes — all within the limits of

state law, revenue and expenditures constraints, union contracts, debt service obligations, and other local and regional commitments and priorities.

HOW TO WEIGH IN: Residents who wish to communicate with the CRC can do so by sending an email to Town Clerk Marilyn Pronovost at mpronovost@watertown-ma.gov Questions and responses to them will be posted on the CRC website.

What was discussed: In addition to these presentations, the 2½ hour meeting (agenda [here](#)), included

questions and comments from CRC members and residents. These queries focused generally on the proposed charter review process and timeframe; how to bolster accessibility, representation, and diversity; how Watertown compares to other cities and towns; and how best to generate whole-town outreach, education, and engagement. Several noted that what we do on outreach could serve as a model for other municipalities, even in the midst of a pandemic when people aren't necessarily thinking about town governance.

- **GUIDING PURPOSE AND PRINCIPLES:** Despite seasoned experience, because of the current situation the CRC is still getting its bearings as it formulates how it's going to proceed. A number of options are being considered, but overall, CRC members acknowledged that flexibility and resilience are key principles. So are robust civic outreach, education, and engagement. To that end, Council President and CRC Chair **Mark Sideris** is forming a CRC subcommittee on community outreach.

- **PROGRAM AND PRIORITIES:**

The CRC has yet to develop a concrete roadmap but continues to ponder several pathways: e.g., review the current charter line by line, or each Article section by section or focus on major and other decisions. One CRC member noted that she'd rather see a program

plan than make scheduling decisions. Given the volume of materials to read and digest, that would enable more time for study and reflection, thus making formal CRC meetings more productive.

Did You Know?

Words matter: A Charter "Commission" comprises elected members charged with creating a new charter. A "Committee" consists of appointed members who are responsible for making revisions or amendments to an existing charter.

- **PROCESS AND PARTNERS:** The timeframe, already disrupted by six months due to the pandemic, has been pushed well into 2021, but the whole process must be concluded in time for next year's

November elections, should there be proposals for revisions. Meanwhile, the Town Council, rather than the CRC, has the authority to extend the timeline. [One of the documents](#) Collins provided set forth how charter change works in Massachusetts.

—by Marcy Murningham

UPCOMING MEETINGS: The CRC meets at 6:00 p.m. on the first and third Tuesday of each month, well into 2021. December meetings are slated for **December 1, December 15,** and possibly **December 29, 2020.** Sign up for notifications [here](#).