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**ATTENDANCE:** Patsy Brescia, Chair; Carl Dickens; Tyler Fairbairn; Richard McQuaid; Benita Watford Raleigh; Angela Wasunna (6:50 p.m.); Michael Witherspoon (6:38 p.m.)

**OTHERS:** Steven Mednick, Commission Counsel

## **PUBLIC HEARING**

### **I. CALL TO ORDER**

Ms. Brescia called the meeting to order at 6:35 p.m.

## II. ROLL CALL

Ms. Brescia called the Roll as indicated above. A Quorum was present.

## III. PUBLIC COMMENT

Ms. Brescia reviewed the history of the work that has been done on the Charter revision over the last six to seven months. She said the Commission worked to bring the Charter that was created in 1913 up to 2023.

Mr. Witherspoon joined the meeting at 6:38 p.m.

Ms. Brescia explained the procedure for public comment this evening.

***Public participation comments are not verbatim and represent a summarization of statements unless otherwise noted. Speakers are Norwalk residents unless otherwise noted.***

Ms. Lisa Brinton said she was familiar with how archaic the document is. She spoke about areas in need of update and in support of eliminating outdated offices. She said she supported simplifying the ballots. Ms. Brinton said that in regard to increasing the Board of Education's oversight, there is a need for oversight on the City side as well. She said the Board of Education's budget is driven by State policy, but she attributes the budget issues to the overly generous tax abatements. Ms. Brinton said she would upload her op ed to the website.

Ms. Brinton said she was in support of a four-year term for mayor and supports minority party rule. She said she would be happy to share the work she did a few years ago; it is a good benchmark on how Norwalk stands up to other towns.

Ms. Wasunna joined the meeting at 6:50 p.m.

Mr. Vinny Scicchitano said it was imperative to focus on improving the checks and balances. The proposed City Charter discusses increasing the Mayor's term, but does not mention the minority party rule. This should be taken as an opportunity to be more inclusive. He noted that he was surprised by the low number of people attending this evening's meeting. He said they must take this opportunity to fight the one party rule. Mr. Scicchitano said that top level appointments should be moved to elected positions.

Ms. Brescia announced that there will be another public hearing before anything is presented to the Common Council.

Ms. Diane Lauricella thanked all those involved in this process. She shared some suggestions and said she will forward her comments to the Commission. She said the Mayor's term should be

commensurate with the Common Council terms. In addition, they should look at increasing the number of people on the Common Council, add members to the Fire and Police Commissions and there should be a Police Citizen's Review Board.

Ms. Lauricella spoke about pay for the Common Council members and said that should be a different item. She pointed to page 13 and acknowledged that she has experienced intolerance and asked for mandatory training about gender equality and civility. Regarding page 16, Ms. Lauricella said that having more women on boards and commissions is not being achieved.

Ms. Brescia said the Commission is focusing on the Charter will be reviewed within the next two to three years with a request that it be reviewed every five years.

Donna Smirniotopoulos reminded everyone that at the conclusion of the last Charter Revision, the Chair recommended reconvening the Commission immediately, but there were not enough votes on the Common Council to enable that. She agreed with Ms. Brinton about eliminating positions that have no function. She agreed with Mr. Scicchitano's suggestion about changing top level appointments to elected positions. She said that she would love to see Planning and Zoning and Board of Estimate and Taxation become elected positions. Ms. Smirniotopoulos said that it is not enough to require minority party representation. She said it was impossible to get an appointment to a board or commission if you were ever critical of leadership. It is not healthy to keep dipping into the same well.

Ms. Smirniotopoulos said she thinks there are a lot of state appointments and there is a lot of double dipping. That is not healthy for this democracy.

Mr. Johnny Cardamone asked about changing the term for mayor and asked if there could be term limits. Mr. Mednick explained that in the State of Connecticut, term limits are not allowed. Mr. Cardamone talked about minority party rule and feels there is a lack of representation.

Ms. Elsa Obuchowski said that boards and commissions have term limits. Mr. Mednick said term limits are allowed for boards and commissions, but not for elected officials.

Mr. John Levin asked if term limits could be enacted through a special act. Mr. Mednick said term limits could be enacted by a general act or a special act. He reviewed Home Rule. Mr. Levin encouraged the Commission to share this information with the public.

A member of the public asked how this would work. Mr. Mednick explained that the public would have to petition their legislators who would introduce it to the legislation. He said it is not normal in the modern era for legislators to grant a recall or term limits, but it can be done.

Ms. Diane Cece said she is generally in favor of moving the Mayor to a four year term; however, she said she would be opposed to it without term limits or a recall. She referenced a 1979

document about home rule and recall and suggested there would be term limits for Common Council members as well as other elected bodies.

Ms. Cece expressed concern about the lack of commissioners that serve on the Police and traffic Authority. She added that she was in favor of a Police Review Board. As a representative of the East Norwalk Neighborhood Association, she said they struggle to get the work out to people. She said the City should use everything in their toolbox to get the word out to people.

Mr. Mednick said he would be happy to talk to the Governor about home rule. Elections are a matter of State concern.

Mr. Mednick explained that a lot of municipalities adopt a four-year term and keep their Common Council at two years.

Ms. Brescia said the plan is to get out into the community to educate people so any revisions will be successful. She added that the Commission was charged with restructuring the document.

Ms. Brescia said they reached out to the appropriate places to get the message out but were not successful. There will be a formal public hearing on the proposed revisions.

Mr. Levin asked Mr. Mednick which towns have term limits and when did the Connecticut legislation last pass a special act. Mr. Mednick said they are not favored, but they adopted the legislation in towns with 60 – 65,000 residents. He said that Bristol adopted term limits in 2016 and Stratford has recall. Wilton also has term limits, although it is not legal. He said term limits and recall always come up in a Charter Revision.

Mr. Levin asked if there was anything preventing Norwalk from having a springing provision in its Charter. Mr. Mednick said he did not recommend that. There is no serious legislation that gives local government the option to do this.

Mr. Levin said that if Norwalk is permitted to referenda, then what is permitted by the State. Mr. Mednick said provisions for referenda have been in the Charter since 1913.

Ms. Lauricella asked about discussed diversity on boards and commissions along with training. Mr. Mednick said they try to establish constitutional standards. He explained that they are reforming the document and not the government. He said that under compliance and cooperation they could include training. Ms. Lauricella said that as an advocate for environmental management, the City is not looking at this in a holistic way. She said that she will write a proposal to Ms. Brescia. Mr. Mednick said he would appreciate anything Ms. Lauricella has to say.

Ms. Brinton noted that Stratford and New Haven have limited recall.

Ms. Brescia asked for comments from the Commissioners. Mr. Fairbairn said he was settled on a two year term for Mayor. Mr. McQuaid said they are going to have a public hearing on this. He added that the charge of this commission was to organize and get the document presentable for 2023. He commended the Commissioners and noted that they have been meeting since the first week in September 2022. He said that Mr. Mednick guided them through this and he feels they are going to have a working document that will be reviewed again and done again in five years.

Ms. Watford said she was surprised that there were so few people here tonight.

Mr. Dickens thanked those who attended this evening. He said the comments were timely.

Ms. Wasunna thanked those who participated this evening and said the engagement was high quality. The challenge is to get the word out.

Mr. Witherspoon thanked all who participated. He said that perhaps another commission will need to deal with the terms for boards.

Ms. Brescia said her intention is to create a list of concerns and interests expressed by the residents. She asked if they could get the local media to pay attention to what they are doing.

There were no further comments and the public hearing was closed.

#### **IV. REVIEW OF COUNSEL REVISIONS, IF ANY OF ARTICLES IV AND V - THE COUNCIL AND MAYOR**

Mr. Mednick reviewed articles four and five and asked the Commissioners to think about this.

Mr. Mednick shared his screen and reviewed the changes made under Article four. He noted that if they wish to increase the pay for Common Council members, it would be subject to referendum. Ms. Watford asked how the public feels about increasing the pay for Common Council members. Mr. McQuaid suggested that they should not increase pay in an election year.

Ms. Brescia asked if this is something the Common Council members could research for themselves. Mr. Mednick explained that those members of the Common Council who are going to advocate for an increase are the appointing authority. They should be told the law and they can put it in the Charter or take it out of the Charter. This is the law. Ms. Brescia said it would be helpful because it shows the Commission heard their input. This could be an issue that is considered for a future charter review.

Mr. Fairbairn said the Common Council should be paid. They need to be aware of how this will be received.

Mr. Mednick explained that the Common Council can't increase their pay. The Mayor can proposed an increase in the budget. If it is in the budget, then that section of the budget would be subject to a referendum.

Mr. Dickens said that this is something they probably do not need to put in the budget at this time.

Ms. Brescia said the consensus of the Commission was to remove the proposal to increase the compensation of the members of the Common Council.

Mr. Mednick shared his screen and reviewed the changes made in Article five – Mayor.

**V. DISCUSSION: ARTICLES VII AND VIII – BOARDS AND COMMISSIONS; AND, DEPARTMENTS AND DEPARTMENT HEADS**

Mr. Mednick said the section on Board and Commissions will be discussed at the next meeting.

**VI. NEXT STEPS**

The Commission will meet on April 27<sup>th</sup> at 6:30 p.m. and on May 3<sup>rd</sup> at 7:30 p.m. Mr. Mednick said he hopes to have a fully consolidated document ready by April 27<sup>th</sup> . A public hearing will take place on May 17<sup>th</sup> and the final meeting date will be determined.

**VII. ADJOURNMENT**

There was no further business, and the meeting was unanimously adjourned at 8:45 p.m.

Respectfully submitted,

Rosemarie Lombardi  
Telesco Secretarial Services