



Seeking Future Perfect

**CRC re:Cap #6
February 2, 2021**

THE TAKEAWAY: *As CRC members and observers reflected on the stories told by previous chief executives and councilors representing comparable Massachusetts municipalities, questions of vision, accountability, and institutional capacity emerged again and again. Most agreed that many improvements to the operations of town government could be made, whatever the structure of governance. The key is to settle on a unified vision and purpose that can serve as a template for gauging whether or not Watertown sets its own destiny.*

“Look well to the growing edge! All around us worlds are dying and new worlds are being born; all around us life is dying and life is being born. The fruit ripens on the tree, the roots are silently at work in the darkness of the earth against a time when there shall be new leaves, fresh blossoms, green fruit. Such is the growing edge!”

—Howard Thurman, [The Growing Edge](#) (1956; 2014)

“It’s not so much the mayor or town manager form of government [but] the people that you have in those roles, whatever they are. . . We have a kind of 1990 government that’s trying to function in 2021.”

—Marcia Ciro, CRC member

“I wish that Watertown could raise its self-esteem a little bit and feel better about itself, because we’re one of the last bastions of land that’s going on around Boston and Cambridge.”

—Anne Fitzpatrick, CRC member

Who gets to decide a community’s future, and how do you seek agreement? How do you know whether or not you’re moving toward that future, or veering off course?

How do you preserve and protect what’s already working, yet give way to new opportunities to thrive? How do you transform fear and defensiveness into courage and creativity in getting there?

These questions may seem abstract, but they were on vivid display during the February 2 Watertown Charter Review Committee (CRC) meeting (agenda [here](#); main page [here](#)). The session covered a wide

Did You Know?

According to the 2015 [Comprehensive Plan](#), “Founded in 1630, Watertown has been described as the ‘mother town’ as it was one of America’s earliest colonial settlements and served as an entry into the heartland of America for early settlers. The early town boundaries encompassed what is now Weston, Waltham, Belmont and large sections of what is now Lincoln, Newton, and Cambridge.”

range of topics, not just the matter of whether a Mayor–Council or Council–Manager form of government is preferred (WCA-TV recording [here](#)). Their deliberations moved beyond that, ranging from big questions of vision and values to more concrete actions that:

- institutionalize better communications, responsiveness, and public participation through technological mechanisms such as a [311 system](#), more public forums, a more interactive website, and more robust reporting on performance against goals;
- beef up the Town Council’s policymaking role beyond the budgetary process through changes in decision scope and mechanism to support it; and

UPCOMING MEETINGS: The CRC meets at 6:00 p.m. on the first and third Tuesday of each month. For more, go to the CRC page [here](#). You also can view them on [WCA-TV](#). The next two meetings are slated for [February 16](#) and [March 2, 2021](#). Agendas will be available within 48 hours of each meeting. Sign up for notifications [here](#).

- return rulemaking to the Town Council from the Town Manager, particularly in the realm of appointments to advisory committees and boards.

Views from the field: The meeting began with a general discussion of what CRC members gained from previous meetings that put different forms of government — Mayor–Council or Council–Manager — on display. On January 5 and 19, members

heard elected and appointed officials from a number of Massachusetts municipalities who described the pros and cons of their experience and gave examples of how they’re dealing with heightened public demands for engagement and accountability. As CRC members reflected on these presentations, they noted that there was more interaction between town officials and residents, whatever the form of government.

In reflecting on those presentations, CRC residential member **Marcia Ciro** was struck by the importance of who’s occupying the chief executive role. “One of the things that I take away is that it’s not so much a mayor or town manager form of government, it is really the people that you have in those roles, whatever they are,” she said. “That really highlighted [for me] that we have kind of a 1990 government that’s trying to function in 2021. That’s what I took away from [the panels]. A lot of these other places felt like they were actually in 2021.”

As other CRC members cited examples of what stood out for them (see *Watertown News* coverage [here](#)), their comments became more forceful when connecting those observations to overall vision — or lack thereof. Throughout the at-times contentious meeting, CRC members expressed frustration over how best to manage the existential tension between what exists now and what Watertown’s future could, or should, be, whatever the form of governance.

They pointed out repeatedly the need for a more responsive town government — along with more public outreach and engagement, beyond passive, *pro forma* 48-hour notices published on the Town’s website. They also cited the need to make better use of existing human and natural resources, especially

in the face of tremendous growth and change. Having a vision, one CRC member said, can help offset exploitation of those resources.

“I think that Watertown has missed out in the last 10 years with our development explosion,” declared CRC member **Anne Fitzpatrick**, who went on to argue that Watertown should to act more aggressively in bargaining with developers to assure that more benefits accrue to the town, not just to developers’ bottom line. “What does Watertown want to be?” she asked. “As we grow, we can’t stop developers from coming in, but we can have a hand in guiding them.

We can show them we have a cohesive vision that reflects the four square miles that represent, to me, this enormous opportunity. In the world, Watertown is amazing. We don’t exploit that. We don’t use it to our advantage. We let opportunities go by.

I wish that Watertown could raise its self-esteem a little bit and feel better about itself, because we’re one of the last bastions of land that’s going on around Boston and Cambridge.

I want Watertown to have a vision, and know where Watertown is going. I want to help. Otherwise, I’m just attending meetings that aren’t getting anything done. . . . I’d like to see a vision that’s hopeful, engaging, engages our location, protects our green spaces, and moves forward with improving them.

PARADIGM, PRINCIPLES & PURPOSE

The “vision thing” got a big boost when **Mark Sideris**, CRC chair and Town Council President, announced the launch of a Preamble Committee. Its charge: create what, in essence, is a vision statement — a public promise or covenant, if you will, to which Watertown government pledges its allegiance. Sideris appointed CRC members and Councilor at Large **Tony Palomba** and District B Councilor **Lisa Feltner**, along with CRC residential member **Bill Oates**, to the Preamble Committee, with Palomba acting as chair. He also asked them to work with **Mike Ward**, current director of UMass Boston’s [Edward J. Collins Center for Public Management](#) who is advising the CRC on the charter review process.

That may pose a challenge to those who believe that you don’t just sit down to write a Preamble and take it from there. A Preamble emerges from public memory, stories, and discussion of what Watertown could be, as well as a sense of its historic journey over almost 391 years. As CRC member and Councilor at Large **John Gannon** observed, “I don’t think a vision is for us [CRC] 16 members to determine. A vision comes from the bottom-up.”

Once written, approved, and voted on, the Preamble would be attached to the [Watertown Home Rule Charter](#). Although it lacks the force of law, it can serve as a constellation of values and principles to which all actors in town government — and, if they so choose, other members of the Watertown community — can turn, as a source of inspiration and guidance, perhaps even disclosure and evaluation.

Put another way, having a Preamble in the town charter can animate strategies and goals that change over time as circumstances warrant. A Preamble can facilitate forward movement in ways that are proactive, prophetic, and pragmatic.

As Mike Ward put it, “Vision is really about whether the CRC thinks the town has a clear vision, and does it get reviewed? Is there a clear pathway for getting implemented, and if not, what types of potential issues are there, and what issues are worth pursuing?”

Many CRC members expressed frustration at the incoherent nature of Watertown's existing "visions," which are manifest in more than one place, including the [2015 Comprehensive Plan](#), the annual budgets, and various planning documents. While there are many vision *statements*, they tend to gather dust on bookshelves or within cabinet drawers. There's no comprehensive vision, they said, for guiding what kind of policies need to be made, plans and procedures to be implemented, tools and technology to incorporate, people to hire, and metrics for measuring progress. General agreement on vision — and the core values embedded in it — not only helps navigate the waters between "here" and "there." It helps guide how best to improve both the *form* and *functions* of government — with or without charter changes.

"It's not that our form of government isn't allowing that process to happen," said **Bill Oates**.

Our government should turn those vision documents into something they could articulate to the town, for feedback, which would be a positive step. . . That would add a lot of value, and address the concerns we've heard.

POLICY, PROGRAM & PRIORITIES

Yet vision alone isn't enough. "When we're talking about vision, we're talking about policy setting. And that's the responsibility of elected officials," noted **Jon Hecht**, CRC member and, until recently, Watertown's state representative and former town councilor. He went on to offer the aforementioned specifics on scale and scope that would strengthen the Council's policymaking role.

On its own, setting policy isn't enough, either. Closed systems aren't built to last. Needed, too, are multiple information flows from inside and out so that accountability, and adaptive resilience, are strengthened. "There could be steps along the lines that Bill [Oates] was just talking about," Hecht said.

That includes regularized, routinized processes that people would speak to when they run for office, the vision they put forward, and asking people to join them. . . . We need to regularize public systems of accountability for implementing the policies that are set. All those — scope, setting policy, accountability to policy — are areas that I think we need to stress.

Tony Palomba agreed with the need for more opportunities for the public to weigh in. He also cited the critical importance of values, and the circular, bottom-up nature of the process, whatever the form of government. "You can't talk about vision without values," he said, then got specific:

Diversity. Equity. Accountability. Those kinds of values can lead to a vision. Values, visions, goals, accountability follow each other. I would hope that we would think, whatever form of government, that process, of identifying the values and the vision and goals — and plans and accountability to carry them out — can happen.

PRACTICE, PROCESS & PARTNERS

Now more than ever, Watertown exists in a dynamic ecosystem that's attracted a great deal of outside money and dealmakers who recognize the opportunities that exist here. The question becomes, *Has Watertown fully leveraged all its human, ecological, and built environment assets in ways that benefit members of the Watertown community, both current and in generations to come?* Put another way, *How can Watertown's government be strengthened in ways that protect these assets, while inviting more opportunity and shared prosperity in service to Watertown's ideals?*

Taken together, the CRC's task is to, as theologian, educator, and Civil Rights leader Howard Thurman wrote 65 years ago, "look to the growing edge" and meet the moment in ways that integrate beliefs with becoming, toward a better Watertown for current and future generations. Who will help them do so?

—by Marcy Murningham, with editing assistance from Vana Pistoftzian

- For WCA-TV recordings of the previous CRC meetings featuring outside elected and appointed officials from Gloucester, Melrose, Beverly, Amherst, Franklin, Salem, and Woburn, see [here](#) (January 19) and [here](#) (January 5).
- For the WCA-TV recording of the January 28, 2021 deliberations of the CSR Communications Subcommittee, see [here](#).

HOW TO WEIGH IN: Residents who wish to communicate with the CRC can do so by sending an email to crc@watertown-ma.gov We understand that questions and responses will be posted on the CRC website.

Watertown Forward also has compiled the names and contact information for all CRC members — and more! — which can be viewed [here](#).