



Rolling in the Deep: Charter Change and Finding Common Ground

CRC re:Cap #8

March 16, 2021

THE TAKEAWAY: After hours of discussion, CRC members voted to reject (11 to 4) a two-track proposal to (a) reboot the Charter Review calendar so the next round would occur before 2030, absent Town Council participation on the Review Committee; and (b) continue to focus its remaining time and energy on existing charter improvements, while also establishing a special structure to continue Charter-related discussions after the formal process ends after the November elections. The CRC also voted (10 to 5) to hold a Public Forum on Form of Government, scheduled for April 6 at 6:00 p.m., at which a vote will be taken. In other matters, CRC Chair and Town Council President Mark Sideris said negotiations with the Town Manager were currently underway regarding a successor agreement.

“Recent examinations of government structure indicate that these forms of government are less distinct than they once were. This is due, in part, to the common practice of incorporating structural features from other forms into one’s current form. This mixing is also attributed to local responses to socioeconomic, demographic, and political changes. The most common mixing occurs across the two most prevalent forms, mayor-council and the council-manager.”

—National League of Cities, “[Cities 101 — Forms of Municipal Government](#)” (October 21, 2016)

“I would like to have us hold [the Collins proposal] as an option — that we reject it today, but hold it as an option. There’s a commitment from folks to keep going, but there are certain realities we have to deal with. When we start digging in, we may find it’s not as easy as we think. I make a motion to delay this decision, and confront the big question [of mayor / manager], then start to dig in. I would like us to put this on hold, if possible.”

—Tony Palomba, CRC member and At-Large Town Councilor (3/16/2021)

“Let me just say, the thing we do, can be undone by this committee. Someone can make a motion at the next meeting to undo.”

—Mark Sideris, CRC chair and TC President (3/16/2021)

“We could have had it all
You had my heart inside of your hands
And you played it to the beat . . .

Throw your soul through
Every open door
Count your blessings
To find what you look for. . .

We could have had it all
Rolling in the deep. . .”

—Adele Laurie Blue Adkins / Paul Richard Epworth, “[Rolling in the Deep](#)” (2010)

Adele’s hit song, “Rolling in the Deep,” is about an intimate relationship gone bad. But according to a popular **Urban Dictionary** [definition](#), it’s conveys feelings of absolute joy and pain. The joy: “Pure, passionate, unconditional and ethereal love. . . that takes you to new places of understanding. . .” The pain: “Pure, passionate, and ethereal pain caused by the betrayal, rejection or an unrequited love that takes you to new places of understanding. . .”

The song came to mind while watching, and later thinking about, the March 16 meeting of Watertown’s appointed **Charter Review Committee** (CRC). (The agenda is [here](#); Watertown Community Access TV’s recording is [here](#); and coverage from *Watertown News*, replete with two dozen robust comments, is [here](#).)

With passions running high — maybe not quite to Adele’s level, but more so than usual — the session lasted almost three hours, the longest of the 11 held since the CRC’s launch on [October 6, 2020](#). It also surfaced the ongoing tension between those wishing to get on with improving various aspects of local governance through Charter modifications, and those seeking to shift to a new Council–Mayor structure.

Vote to reject: Instead, after two hours of commentary, on Tuesday night CRC voted 11 to 4 to reject (for the moment, anyway) a [Collins Center proposal](#) to split the process into two parts (for more, see *re:Cap #7*, [here](#)). The proposal was developed and presented by **Mike Ward**, a policy expert who explained the desire to accommodate those who wish to be more engaged in town governance, while adhering to the increasingly tight timeframe. Ward, a Watertown resident, is currently the director of UMass Boston’s [Edward J. Collins Center for Public Management](#), which was retained to advise the CRC on the review process. His two-track proposal took people by surprise, to put it

Did You Know?

Watertown’s first Home Rule Charter (1980), Article 8, Section 8–1(b) provided for a “*special or standing committee of the council and four additional persons to be appointed by the council president.*” [Emphasis added] Its charge was to review the charter every ten years, but in theory it could oversee how well government is working based on a constant process of feedback and reflection.

mildly.

Referring to heightened public interest in the process, CRC member and former Watertown State Rep. **Jon Hecht** wanted clarity on timelines. “It’s been difficult to get as much community input as we would like,” he said. “Despite the challenges, my sense is that the Committee is ready to consider some significant changes to improve the role of government. . . I’d like us also to agree to the process to be used to [get it done] within that timeframe. Could Mike at least address the question of the time frame that we’re dealing with here?”

Ward’s reply: “There are things that need the council’s vote to go on the ballot. We need to wrap this up to let the Council have time to cover [proposed CRC recommendations] and time for the Clerk to get it on this November’s ballot.

That includes not changing the form of government. . . We had put an estimate in the [early timeframe](#), and got backed up by a couple of Council meetings. We were kind of using June and July as a rough breakpoint for [Council deliberations and voting].

In addition to the looming election schedule, Ward reminded everyone that other steps on the path to charter change may include state legislative and/or attorney general review of proposed changes. But before any of that can happen, the CRC members must first come to majority agreement about what they propose, then write a final report outlining their recommendations and reasoning by June. At that point, the final report goes to the nine-member Town Council — all of whom having served as CRC members — for further discussion, debate, and a vote. That would occur during June, July, and August.

With that goal in mind, the original “[Draft Timeline](#)” submitted by the Collins Center on November 6, 2020, identified March, April, and May as the period in which work on the CRC’s draft report and recommendations would begin. As of now, the CRC is nowhere near that.

Vote to hold public forum and CRC vote: Moments after the vote to reject the two-track charter Review process, a majority of CRC members voted 10 to 5 to [hold a public forum on April 6](#) for residents to weigh in, after which a vote would occur. The subject: Whether Watertown should keep its current Council–Manager form of government, switch to a Mayor–Council form, or revert to the previous Open Town Meeting–Select Board form that prevailed for centuries up until 1980. After an unspecified amount of time for people to testify, CRC members are expected to vote up or down on which structure should be adopted.

Despite reservations about continuing this Mayor / Manager discussion and forcing a vote on April 6, there appeared to be a determination to “go forward, drill down, and make changes.” That’s how CRC member and former Town Councilor **Bill Oates** put it. He cited a couple of areas ripe for change: The balance of power between the Council and Manager. Another: “The whole citizen engagement / citizen participation thing.

I was looking at a subcommittee meeting from several years ago. Mike Ward was there, he presented many of the things that were in this Charter Review. [Citizen participation] clearly was being discussed at a high level by the Council. Here we are, three years later: We don’t have a community participation officer, we don’t have engagement.

Is this a majority / minority of the Council, or is it that the Manager won't let them do it?

What part can be done by the Council, and what needs to be done by changes to Charter?

PARADIGM, PRINCIPLES & PURPOSE

Watertown is not alone in its struggle for effective and accountable governance. In 2021, Watertown,

along with other municipalities across the land, confronts more complex realities that are systemic and multi-tiered. These challenges affect both the quality and accountability of town services, and are influenced by regional, state, national, and global dynamics. In these times, a more holistic, intersectional, *polycentric* (meaning beyond tiers and borders) understanding is called for that transcends

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 **April 6** — a **public forum on government form** — and **April 20, 2021**. Agendas will be available within 48 hours of each meeting. Sign up for notifications [here](#).

traditional governance form and bureaucratic design. That recognition is reflected in the trend toward “hybridization,” as municipalities seek to imagine, and then design, the form of government that works best for them, borrowing from both “mayor” and “manager” motifs so as to more completely integrate their guiding values and principles. From this perspective, the sky's the limit.

But the CRC has yet to reach that point.

POLICY, PROGRAM & PRIORITIES

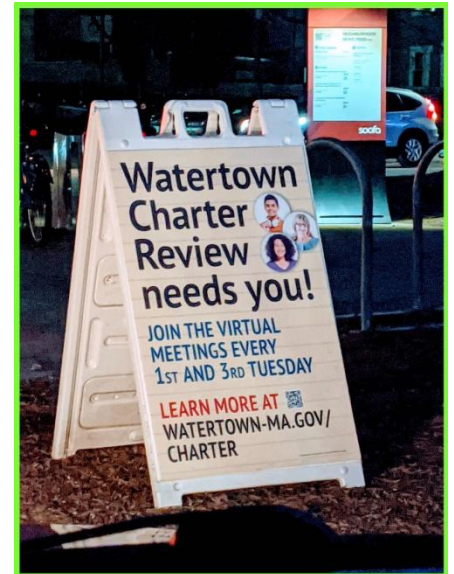
In some ways, the March 16th discussion took attendees and observers to Adele's “new levels of understanding” insofar as the Charter Review process is concerned, even as it appears to be falling off track. That's because during the past six months, most of the CRC meetings have been overshadowed by this Mayor / Manager question, even as most of those actively engaged have said they'd rather spend more time on diagnosing weaknesses in town governance and then addressing them. (See minutes from second CRC meeting, held October 20, 2020, [here](#); November 17, 2020 [here](#); December 1 [here](#); and so on.)

The Collins Center team advised CRC members and observers [in early November](#) that the goal was to address and settle the Mayor / Manager question by the end of January or early February 2021. On [December 1, 2020](#), Collins modified its stance by stating that in January, guest panels would discuss different forms of government, with March as the new target date for deciding which course of action to take. That decision would still leave ample time to work on appropriate charter changes. This has not happened.

Meanwhile, the CRC and public observers also expected to hear from the current Town Manager, **Mike Driscoll**, after hearing from other Town library and school officials who appeared at the [November 17th meeting](#) to answer questions. That didn't happen, either.

Instead, over the past six months and operating within the constraints of a pandemic, CRC members and public observers have:

- been brought up to date by Town Councilor **Vincent Piccirilli** regarding key topics, takeaways, and changes made during 2010 Charter Review process (October 6; minutes [here](#) and presentation [here](#));
- heard from Town Attorney **Lauren F. Goldberg, Esq.** of **KP Law** on what the charter review process entails (October 6; minutes [here](#) and presentation [here](#));
- learned from newly-appointed Chief Information Officer **Chris McClure** about interactive technology plans for upgrading and increasing accountability and responsiveness, with special help for the CRC (December 1; minutes [here](#));
- discussed charter priorities and reviewed emerging themes with help from Mike Ward and UMass Boston's Collins Center (October through March; Collins document cache [here](#));
- formed a **Communications Subcommittee** to elicit more civic awareness of and engagement in the Charter Review process; it has met six times (December; February 3rd update on tech support progress from Chris McClure to Mike Driscoll, [here](#));
- listened to stories told by guest councilors and municipal chief executives (mayor and managers) about the pros and cons of both a Council –Manager and Council–Mayor structures (January);
- triggered action on creating an [updated organization chart](#) (January);
- formulated a [Charter Review Poll](#) comprising seven substantive questions, with an eighth one for comments (January; poll results, as of March 14th, [here](#));
- formed a **Preamble Subcommittee** after having had some discussion of preambles; it has meet twice (January Collins memo [here](#)); and
- pondered specific areas where charter changes could be made, as presented by Mike Ward (February 16 presentation [here](#)); and
- made signs and banners promoting the Charter Review process and encouraging local residents to get involved.



A lot has been accomplished, all things considered. You'd think the momentum would carry the process forward. But as CRC member and Town Councilor **Angeline Kounelis** observed, referring to the lengthy discussion prior to the two critical votes, "We need to focus. We need to focus hard. I was really surprised when the two-track approach was brought forward two weeks ago. We've spent most of this evening discussing it. It's now 7:20 [p.m.], and we haven't accomplished that much."

PRACTICE, PROCESS & PARTNERS

While some have expressed interest in moving to a mayoral form, many CRC members, along with actively engaged Watertown residents, have said repeatedly that it's hard to determine what *form* of governance Watertown should have without a better *baseline understanding* of: (a) where Watertown is going; (b) the specific vision, values, and ideals it seeks to incorporate along the way; (c) what currently is and is not working in town government, including barriers to better performance; (d) feedback loops

for periodic gathering and analysis of this information, to enable better decision making about what might be done; and (e) a process for developing a range of remedial actions that could be taken to address immediate and longer-term problems. These remedies may or may not require modifications to the Charter.

Residents weigh in: Such caveats and considerations are reflected in an [18-page summary of ideas, views, and concerns](#) submitted by 24 Watertown residents in a document that was uploaded on Tuesday, March 16, before the CRC meeting. Respondents were taking up the CRC’s invitation to submit thoughts and proposals via the CRC’s links at watertown-ma.gov/charter and crc@watertown-ma.gov.

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! — that can be viewed [here](#).

As for the public forum on April 6, not everyone was optimistic there was ample time for planning. “As chair of the Communications Subcommittee, three weeks isn’t going to be enough time to get people engaged,” said **Marcia Ciro**, CRC member and Communications Subcommittee chair, who then pleaded with her colleagues. “I’ve noticed that not many other councilors are doing much on your lists to get people involved. Before I vote [on holding the forum], I’d ask, *What are you going to do to publicize it?* If you don’t have a plan for that, you’re voting on nothing, really.”

As the CRC and engaged residents prepare for yet another meeting dedicated to the question of what form of government suits Watertown best at this time, CRC Member and District Councilor **Lisa Feltner** reminded everyone of the significance of their task. “I think the public needs to be very aware that this is the most important thing going on in this town,” she said, after the CRC voted to reject the Collins Center proposal and move forward with a public forum on April 6. “The CRC has the most important business in this town in front of it. I would hope this view is supported by this Council, Administration, and Town Council.”

Rolling in the deep: So we come full circle, back to the joy and pain about which Adele sang, and the binary question of Mayor or Manager.

But perhaps it needn’t be binary at all. Perhaps it’s time to do what other municipalities are doing, and construct a hybrid model that works for Watertown — one that reimagines collaborative governance in ways that include all members of the Watertown community, not just government.

In that way, maybe, just maybe, we can move from rolling in the deep to finding common ground.

—by *Marcy Murningham*, with editing assistance from *Vana Pistoftzian*

- For more on optimal forms of city government, see James V. Svara and Douglas J. Watson, eds., [More Than Mayor or Manager: Campaigns to Change Form of Government in America’s Largest](#)

[*Cities*](#) (Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 2010.) As for contextual limits to Watertown's power, see David J. Barron, Gerald E. Frug, and Rick T. Su, [*Dispelling the Myth of Home Rule: Local Power in Greater Boston*](#) (Cambridge, MA: Rappaport Institute for Greater Boston, John F. Kennedy School of Government, Harvard University, 2004).

- For more, visit the **International City Managers Association** (now called ICMA) [website](#), which has a [wealth of material](#) on the Council–Manager form of government, including [civic engagement](#), [civic education](#), and [performance management](#).
- Another excellent resource is the **Metropolitan Area Planning Council (MAPC)**, which maintains a repository of data sets, data tools, growth projections, and research and analysis. Watertown is a member of MAPC's [Inner Core Committee](#), which comprises 21 cities and towns within the metropolitan Boston area. ICC's purpose is to “explore issues of mutual concern and foster joint action.”
- WCA-TV now has a dedicated playlist comprising **all 11 Charter Review Committee meetings** held to date, going back to the first one held on [October 6, 2020](#) (that one lasted two hours). The CRC meeting playlist be found [here](#). Meanwhile, the **CRC Communications Subcommittee has met six times** since its launch on [December 11, 2021](#); links to recordings of subsequent meetings held [January 4](#), [January 28](#), [February 11](#), [March 4](#), and [March 11](#) reside on the WCA-TV website. It expects to meet biweekly, on Thursdays, beginning at 6:00 p.m. As of this writing, the **CRC's Preamble Subcommittee has met twice**, on [February 22](#) (minutes [here](#); report [here](#)) and [March 8](#); it generally meets on alternate Mondays from 5:30 to 6:30 p.m., with its next meeting slated for [March 22](#). Future meetings are scheduled for April 5, May 3, and May 17.
- As the Town continues to improve its website, some documents are getting moved around. All of the documents pertaining to the **2020-21 Charter Review Committee** — including those generated by the CRC, its subcommittees, and the Collins Center — can be viewed [here](#).