

CONWAY CHARTER COMMISSION AGENDA
CONWAY TOWN HALL MEETING ROOM
CONWAY, NH

August 23, 2023, at 5:30 PM

Attendance

The following members were present: Ray Leavitt, Victoria Noel Blake, Mark Guerrigue, Harrison Kanzler, Karen Umberger, David Weathers and Thomas Holmes, S. Sands.

Absent- E. Grant.

Pledge of Allegiance

Public Hearing in accordance with RSA 49-B:4 V

T. Holmes opened the Public Hearing at 5:30. We are here to discuss the various forms of government allowed to a Town like Conway under statutes. The Conway Daily Sun did an excellent job today describing it in an efficient manner. It is a complicated subject. Eliza printed off charts for all to look at. I'd like to call up the first person to speak. We will hold a 2nd public hearing later on in the season, where we will be coming out with what our decision have been to the public.

Joe Lentini- I perceive the problem not to be the form of government, but the fact that information is not disseminated in a way that most people access anymore. I talk to lots and lots of young people, and young people from my point of view do not pick up a newspaper to get their information. They get it electronically; they get it on their phone. I get push notifications all the time from different news feeds. If the town of Conway were to have a website that looked sort of modern and had a way of feeding information to people through the various multimedia systems available more people would look at their phone and see what's going on. 20% of the people show up because I believe a large number of people in this town do not know what's going on, that's just the reality. The world has changed, and we have to keep up with it.

Mr. Marvel- I'd like to say that I'm not in favor of offering change simply for the sake of change. I don't think any of us know why people voted in favor of the article at town meeting. I know that I voted in favor of it in hopes of getting a grip on the school district, which this doesn't do, and I think others did. Perhaps even the people who signed the petition, of which I was also one. I'm fairly satisfied with the way the town is run. We have our little disagreements about parking and parking stickers. I think the town has run pretty reasonably; the school district is another issue. The Josiah Bartlett Center for Public Policy recently released a report indicating that NH has the worst proportion of school staff teachers to students of any other state in NE. The school district is run very ineffectively, and I think that if the voters can get an easier means of having their wishes known than the deliberative session that we have under SB2 then we would be a lot

more satisfied. So, what I'm suggesting is that either this committee suspend its operations until next year. I think its possible to get a similar ballot issue on the school warrant, or simply dissolve let it take its course in that way. I don't think there's much we can do improve town government, what we need to get ahold of is the school.

Mr. LeFebvre- I have to agree with a lot of what my colleagues Mr. Marvel said. When this first began I think people did not indeed think it was going to be able to not only deal with town issues, but the school district issues. The school district and the town are very different. You may do whatever you want with town government, the school district, however, will still remain under SB2 because it is to their best interest. They have the power to pass their own budget, do what they wish and even at the deliberative, after the deliberative session, if there's any fallout from the budget committee, they can muster enough votes to come back and say no were not going to take that 1.2 million cut we are going to restore it. Mr. Marvel has a good point. It is possibly too early for you to do something with the town until you have a chance to see if there's some sentiment on the school side of the house to also look at how they're doing business. Having been the former chair of the budget committee, I would say that a 17-member committee is to large. I would recommend reducing the budget committee.

Cynthia Johnson- in option one will we still have selectmen?

T. Holmes- no, there would be no selectmen, they'd be converted to councilors.

Cynthia Johnson- option 2 is a town council allowing voters to decide some or all legislative issues at the ballot. What in particular are legislative issues.

T. Holmes- it would be up to a TC to determine warrant articles they would like to go before the voters, like budgets, bond issues, zoning articles. It is possible that a TC could decide to incorporate things like valley vision and the airport into the overall budget combine capital reserve funds into a single vote and just shorten the ballot significantly than what we have now which is 45 to 50 articles.

Cynthia Johnson- option 3 would allow residents to vote on the town budget and depending on the charter zoning articles and bond issues, so then the charter could be designed such that people could not vote on zoning articles and bond issues. In the past there've been charities that we vote yay or nay as stand alone articles, so where would they fall into this situation?

T. Holmes- if you had a pure town council form of government without any annual meeting, without a budget committee, that decision on whether to fund those charities would be left to the 5 or 7 or whatever members of the town council would be elected, then after that you fall down to other options where the town council puts out warrant articles at an annual meeting of what in their discretion, what they think the people should have a say on.

Cynthia Johnson- Option 5, I don't even know what that's talking about. Option 5 would offer a BOS and another group of people are elected to attend the annual town meeting. What does that mean?

T. Holmes- That's called a representative town meeting and you would have a town meeting show up like in the old days only instead of everybody being able to come, you'd have representatives who run for a position to be able to represent Birch Hill ect. You'd have mini ward bosses who would be in charge of representing their neighborhood at a meeting annually to vote on different issues.

Cynthia Johnson- and who would decide where the lines of demarcation are?

T. Holmes- we have to have an equal number of people in each section.

Cynthia Johnson- personally, I don't really want to change anything because I'm an old fuddy-duddy, but because I don't like the idea of giving a few people an incredible amount of power. We have selectmen and different boards, and they already have enough power. I regret that we don't vote at town meeting. I was under the impression that was put forth because people didn't want other people to know how they voted.

Mike Digregorio- I'm a big believer in the government that we have today. It does have some flaws, and I clearly understand some of those flaws as Mr. Marvel had pulled out or said earlier. I also would include, you know, packing the court, so to speak the library. I know you will do what is best. I would beg you to look at some videos from around the country at their town councils and how they work. They are a disaster. It puts all the power into a small group of people. They can change their pay at whims notice, they can literally change ordinances by the week. If we want to make a change with the planning board it does ultimately get put on the warrant and before the voters. The library budget is out of control. I think taking control of the library budget would be a great thing too. I'm not going to dispute what Mr. Marvel said about packing the school board or the deliberative portion. I don't want to be punished because other people don't get out and vote. Apathy is killing government all around the country. I'm terrified that you guys are going to make a recommendation to go to a town council and I think that punishes all of us because it gives too much power to a very small group of people.

Jackie Scoletti- I understand that there are 234 municipalities in NH. 13 of them are incorporated as cities. I heard at another meeting here that maybe we could be considered a city, but I don't like to think so. We have 214 other communities who have traditional town meetings and 73 have adopted SB2. I'm wondering what majority has to vote, majority or super majority?

T. Holmes- none of my readings said it would deviate from any other board or commission which would be a simple majority.

Jackie Scoletti- we have a pretty good exercise of self-government here in Conway and I'd like to see that continue, thank you.

T. Holmes- I'm going to close the PH at 6:01 pm and allow the press to speak separately.

Cynthia Johnson- I appreciate that this meeting was held at 5:30 so I only had to miss 30 minutes of work. Having meetings before 5:30 precludes a number of people from attending.

Approval of Agenda

H. Kanzler motioned to approve the agenda as presented; seconded by D.Weathers.

Vote in favor 8-0

M. Guerrigue- the tone from the public here is that they don't want to see things changed, but are there things you want to see changed? I'm curious as to what outside issues that we should be looking at that should or could be addressed.

T. Holmes- Mr. LeFebvre- did discuss resizing the budget committee.

M. LeFebvre- I would suggest you look at going back to the old-style town hall meeting. The one that were interested showed up.

T. Holmes- I think if you watch the meetings going forward you will see us drilling down. The feeling I have is that we're not going to be too radical about it.

B. Marvel- I am ambivalent about going back to the traditional town meeting. In the 80's we had a 4-night meeting. The people who get to make the decisions are the ones that actually come out and are prepared.

Damon Steer Conway Daily Sun- look at the 5 or 5 forms of govt that you can choose from. Then talk to the state reps and maybe there might be a 7th option that could exist. None of these options seem really appealing. Maybe asking the state reps to create a new option. If you went to a town council, who's to say that those on the school board wouldn't just become councilors and do whatever they want.

T. Holmes- I want to remind everyone that the voters will have the final say on anything this commission proposes.

D. Steer- I think it would have been helpful to spend a little time discussing the options and sort of flush em out and explaining them and having a conversation. I think it would have been good to have a presentation.

T. Holmes- I think the feeling of the commission has been that were reluctant to go too far without hearing from the public first.

Approval of Minutes

K. Umberger motioned to approve the minutes of July 26, 2023, as presented, seconded by H. Kanzler.

Vote in favor 7-0-1

R. Leavitt motioned to approve the minutes of August 2, 2023, as presented; seconded by D. Weathers.

Vote in favor 7-0-1

Review updated budget

T. Holmes- I think I sent all the updated budgets. We have not received the invoice from Attorney Courtney yet. We are a little over \$10,000 of about \$15,000 budget. You can see how we're spending our money. We are going to have some future expenses for advertising, but I think we are in the safety zone right now.

Discussion of Public Hearing Input and Options (ref: Eliza Grant Flow Chart)

T. Holmes- discussion on what the public has given is this evening.

S. Sands- Cynthia Johnson brought up a good point that people work all sorts of different schedules in this Valley, and I'd be hard pressed to pick a night of the week where a good portion of us are not working and unless we call it a holiday and close everything up. It's tough to get a time where everybody can attend. I think that is why we went to SB2 because polls are open all day. I think having more representatives and represent all parts of our towns. I think not changing anything is not what our mandate is. I think it needs to look at it and do something this year. I heard people were upset with the selectboard and felt like they didn't have a say. As Cynthia said its tough to leave work early to get here, but people can write letters to the editor, they can write letters to the selectboard, but those letters don't hold the same weight as coming to a meeting. People don't want to see the budget committee go away.

T. Holmes- You are in favor of a ballot box type of arrangement where people can go vote on a particular day.

S. Sands- I think that's the only fair option for people to have their say. I'm not pleased when I spend 3 months on the budget committee digging into these budgets just to have everything you just worked on voted away.

R. Leavitt- I'm pretty satisfied with what we have. I disagree with Stacy. The discussion was on parking and I didn't support it but at the end of the day the voices of the people spoke and the topic got shelved. We also have the power to shorten the ballot by giving more power to the

selectmen to do so. And if you don't then don't complain. At some point you have to have faith in what they are doing.

D. Weathers- I'm in agreement with Ray. When I was sitting on the board I'm representing the town, I'm not representing a specific area and I don't think I should be. I'm looking to do what's best for all citizens of the town. There is also a lot of information put out there before people to vote so they are informed. I do agree the young people would prefer it on their phones, but I think the town does a good job preparing and sending out the information. I think the citizens like the way its going right now, and I'm not in favor of what I've heard so far of a town council

M. Guerrigue- for those under 50 the Conway Daily Sun is online. I don't think this commission is obligated to offer up something if we don't agree. I've changed how I felt. I was in favor of the representative because I was critical of the selectmen all being from Conway village. I do think the idea that Mike put out there of watching the videos of other towns out there. People were really upset with some issues and therefore Dave got voted off. We have not fully explored all the options and it is all about tradeoffs. There are major flaws in our system.

H. Kanzler- based on public input as far as putting power in the hands of few people, none of these options gets rid of a planning board and it looks like we still keep a budget committee. A lot of those pieces far as checks and balances still exist if we go to a town council. One thing we don't have, we don't know the will of the voters yet. We should probably have a copy of the warrant that shows our charge. Whether or not there was ambiguity of what was voted on. I will also agree that while the Conway Daily Sun is online it is expensive. A lot of what we talked about was to much power in the hands of to few people, but no matter what we do, all options still puts too much power in to few people.

T. Holmes- article 35 non-monetary to see if the town will vote to establish a charter commission for the purpose of revising or amending the municipal charter submitted by petition recommended by the board of selectmen 5-0 and recommended by the budget committee
Pretty straightforward.

S. Sands- is there anyway to put out a survey?

T. Holmes- this article had my email address for them to send in any questions or comments and we only got 2.

S. Sands- we need to reach out to others in other ways.

H. Kanzler- I disagree that that what we heard was a good statistical breakdown. I do not think this is a good representation of the voters. I think we need to go with the people who did vote. I think based on the wording people voted because they wanted to see change.

V. Blake- I voted because I think it is important to take a look at it. I came into this not knowing a lot but leave knowing more. I don't think we have to offer any option if we conclude what we

have works and put more energy into making what we have work better. My demographic that I was voted in by feels that if it is not working for all then it has to be looked at. There doesn't have to be a plan b. if we could narrow it down and condense it into a form, they can absorb it.

M. Guerrigue- a survey I don't feel we will gain a lot.

T. Holmes- I'd like to point out that Mrs. Johnson talked to the time of meetings. The selectmen open up public comment to the end so that it is usually to the end. So, there is time for the public to weigh in. I think we can do a lot to reduce the warrant. The selectman can have more power. I agree the town could be better at modern media. As an outsider coming here 30 years ago NH is leery of giving too much power into too few hands. I think we need to do what we need to now. In summary I think we can work really hard to reduce and shorten the ballot. I agree with shortening the budget committee. And I do believe the public wants to have a vote. I've narrowed myself down to 2 stay with the status quo with some adjustments through the budget committee, warrant size and so on. Or a very weak town council with a budgetary annual meeting and a ballot box event, sort of like SB2 like with a town council.

H. Kanzler- I heard from someone who was involved in expanding the BOS from 3-5, but I heard that 5 was the max. It was also my understanding that we can come up with our own option and float it to the AG's office.

K. Umberger- I think we need to go through the entire charter that we have and look at what needs to be changed or adjusted. This charge was to amend the charter.

T. Holmes- I will add it to the agenda to look at the charter to discuss what needs to be looked at.

Old Business

T. Holmes- we will invite the Budget Committee to the next meeting to hear their thoughts.

R. Leavitt- maybe invite other board and committee members to hear their input.

S. Sands- we really haven't had a chance to discuss, we do have subcommittees and one of the subcommittees was to see what this commission was doing. Our last meeting was cut short. Our next meeting wasn't until September 13th, it would be nice to have a discussion at that level beforehand.

Mark Guerrigue- do we know how it would work mechanically if we put a similar article on the school ballot next year?

H. Kanzler motioned that we eliminate cities for consideration; seconded by K. Umberger.

Vote in favor 7-1

H. Kanzler motioned that we eliminate representative town meeting for consideration; seconded by R. Leavitt.

Vote in favor 8-0

New Business (Invitation to Budget Committee Chair to attend a future meeting)

T. Holmes- do we want to invite anyone else?

K. Umberger- I think we need to look at the charter and then decide who to invite.

T. Holmes- the next agenda items will be to go over the other parts of the charter that don't involve the structure of government and then we can develop a list of various boards in town that we might want to talk to.

Adjournment

T. Holmes motioned to adjourn the meeting.

Respectfully Submitted,
Alicia Jipson
Recording Secretary