

BOARD OF ALDERMEN

City of Newton
Massachusetts

INTER-OFFICE CORRESPONDENCE

To: The Board of Aldermen

From: Ald. Rick Lipof and Ald. Verne Vance

Re: Reduction in the Size of the Board of Aldermen

Date: February 10, 2006

For the convenience of our colleagues, we are pleased to submit this executive summary of our February 2 memorandum on our proposal for reduction in the size of the Board of Aldermen.

We submit this in support of the following docket item:

Aldermen Lipof, Vance, Hess-Mahan, Lennon, Lappin, Schnipper, Harney, Weisbuch, Parker, and Sangiolo requesting that the Board of Aldermen and His Honor the Mayor submit a Home Rule Petition to the Legislature seeking approval by the Legislature of an amendment of the charter of the City of Newton reducing the number of aldermen by at least seven, the exact number and composition of the Board specified in such petition to be determined through discussion and vote by the members of the Board.

Favorable action on this item by the Board would simply clear the way for consideration of this proposal by the Mayor and, if concurred in by him, submission of the petition to the Legislature. If approved by the Legislature, the proposal would be submitted to the voters of Newton, who would have the final say on whether to make the proposed amendment to the city charter. We summarize our reasons for this proposal as follows:

1. A single-chamber legislative body of 24 members is unnecessarily large and expensive to serve fully the needs of a city of 84,000 residents and dilutes the accountability of the aldermen to the public.
 - A. Newton's 24-member single-chamber legislative body is by far the largest such city legislative body in Massachusetts. Other cities have such bodies ranging mostly from 9 to 13 members, with a maximum of 15.
 - B. Newton's ratio of legislators to residents is 1 to 3,513, as compared with such ratios in cities of comparable size to Newton ranging from 8,556 in New Bedford to 16,906 in Springfield.

- C. The rationale for the charter provision for two aldermen-at-large from each ward was to ensure that the bulk of legislative power rests in aldermen elected citywide with a presumed more citywide perspective than ward aldermen. That rationale rests on a myth that is not borne out by experience in Newton or in other Massachusetts cities. Such cities that have district and at-large legislators all have fewer at-large legislators or, at most, one more at-large legislator than district legislators. There is no evidence that the legislative decisions in any of those cities do not reasonably reflect the interests of the particular city as a whole. And in Newton there is no evidence to show voting patterns of at-large aldermen that differ from those of ward aldermen.
 - D. Elimination of each aldermanic position would save the city \$9,750 in stipends annually, together with the city's costs of health care and other fringe benefits for those aldermen who opt for such benefits, and copying and other costs of serving a large number of aldermen. Such cost savings, while a tiny part of the overall city budget, dwarf the annual savings of \$2,750 per alderman resulting from the Board's rejection last year of an increase in the aldermanic stipend.
 - E. A 24-member Board of Aldermen, that includes two at-large aldermen from each ward, unreasonably dilutes the accountability of the aldermen to the public. In aldermanic elections there are too many names for the public to follow, and elections for two at-large aldermen from each ward preclude head-to-head challenges that enhance aldermanic accountability.
2. Reducing the size of the Board by seven or eight members would not diminish the Board's ability to do its work effectively and efficiently.
- A. Most of the Board's work involves relatively non-controversial items that are disposed of on first call, usually based on a unanimous committee report or reports.
 - B. Other cities of comparable size to Newton dispose of their legislative business with legislative bodies of no more than 15. Four other cities that, like Newton, place their special-permit granting authority in their legislative body carry out that and all their other legislative functions with a legislative body of just 9 members. In all cities, except possibly Boston and Cambridge, city legislators, like those in Newton, are paid small stipends and are expected to serve part-time. We find it difficult to believe that 13 to 17 legislators in Newton, supported by highly-qualified city departments and financial resources that far outstrip those of most other Massachusetts cities, could not perform the Board's functions at least as effectively and efficiently as the legislative bodies in cities that have as many or fewer legislators as Newton would then have.
 - C. A reduced Board of Aldermen would still be able to provide full constituent service to the city's residents. Having 16 or 17 aldermen would leave a representation ratio in Newton of one alderman per about 5,000 residents, as

- . compared with such ratios in cities of comparable size of one legislator per more than 8,000 residents.
3. Action to reduce the size of the Board of Aldermen can and should be initiated by the Board without the need to establish a possible new Board operating structure and without waiting for a charter commission process that may never happen.
 - A. If the size of the Board were reduced, it would properly be the task of the newly elected Board to establish the Board's operating structure. There exist numerous operating models for effectively conducting the business of a city's legislative body of 9 to 15 members in the many other Massachusetts cities that do so.
 - B. If a majority of the Board of Aldermen is satisfied that the city and its residents would be well served by a reduction in the size of the Board, then the Board should act now rather than waiting for a citizen-initiated charter commission process that may never happen. Such action by the Board would not itself make the proposed charter change but would simply initiate a process that would ultimately enable the voters to decide on the change.