
League of Women Voters of Newton

Newsletter

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Special Edition: Members' Comments on the Charter Proposal

Newton voters established a Charter Review Commission in 2015. The nine members elected have concluded their research and recommendations. This November, citizens will have a yes or no vote on whether to adopt the new City Charter that the Commission has proposed.

LWV Newton has followed these developments closely. Members have spoken on various issues to the Commission.

Now it is time for the LWV Newton as a body to decide whether to support adoption of the proposed new Charter. We will meet April 30 at the Waban Library to discuss, debate, and decide this question.

In advance of that meeting, we invited members to submit brief (250 word) comments regarding the proposal, to be published in this special edition newsletter. On the following pages are the comments we received, unedited, listed alphabetically by member. – Linda Morrison, Newsletter Editor



Thank you!

Bryan Barash

Rhanna Kidwell

Brooke Lipsitt

Jane Frantz

Josh Krintzman

Karen Manning

Howard Haywood

Anne Larner

Chris Steele

Resources and Information

[Charter Commission web site](#)

[Current charter, City of Newton](#)

[Final Report, Newton Charter Commission](#)

[LWVN Observer Notes from Charter Commission Meetings](#)

[LWVN Charter Commission Initiative](#)

[LWVN 2010 Charter Study](#)

Jen Abbott

Representation from electoral districts, elected by the districts, is a much needed facet of American democracy. Yet, it is not necessarily the right choice at the municipal level. On the state and national levels, 100% at-large voting would be impractical. However, in Newton, at-large voting has been working effectively at the municipal level for decades.

Given the fact that our city's diversity is not geographically clustered by Ward, I agree with the opinion of the Charter Commission that 100% at-large voting is the best way to ensure that ALL Newton residents are able to vote for the candidates that best represent their values and interests. In fact, at-large voting, particularly in the proposed pool, may actually benefit minority voices spread across the city. Additionally, a voter's address should not prohibit their ability to support (or oppose) any elected official that is making decisions about issues that affect their daily lives, like transportation, public safety, schools and green spaces.

Our elected officials should live throughout the city, and the residency requirements of 8 members of the City Council and School Committee ensure that this is the case. However, the role of our elected officials is to work for the good of Newton as a whole. It is essential that every elected official be aware of the issues of interest to residents across the city and that they be accountable to those residents on Election Day.

Lisle Baker

As a LWV member for many years, I urge the League to oppose the Charter change to eliminate Ward Councilors. They provide Newton citizens with important focused representation and diversity of opinion on our City Council.

Newton has been well-governed over the years. A big part of that success has been its large, diverse,

hard-working, and unusually collaborative, but also carefully deliberative, City Council.

Ward Councilors have played a key role, often providing the first line of help for constituents with a problem, aided by able at-Large Councilors from the Ward to help solve it.

In my Ward alone, it was initially the Ward Councilor responses to concerned Ward citizens that led to saving the Newton Commonwealth Golf Course for public recreation, constructing the Covenant Residences affordable housing project on Commonwealth Avenue, acquiring the historic Durant-Kenrick Homestead, making the Waban Hill Reservoir available as a public park, and establishing the Chestnut Hill Historic District, all of benefit to the City as a whole, as well as to the Ward.

Newton has benefited from having a combination of Ward and at-Large Councilors to divide the labor, provide focused representation to constituents, and offer city-wide diversity of perspectives.

Legislative bodies elsewhere are often dysfunctional or controlled by a favored few. Our combination of Ward and at-Large Newton City Councilors works well for Newton citizens, neighborhoods, and the City. Let's keep it that way.

Alicia Bowman

The Charter Commission has done an outstanding job and should be commended for rising above emotion and applying research and thoughtful discussion of options. This commitment to an open, fact based discussion and development of options is a key reason I am in support of the proposed changes.

I specifically support the proposed changes to the City Council. Our current City Council model is cumbersome given the sheer number of councilors and the focus on ward representation is very limiting. Our need for representation goes beyond what village we live in. Our need for representation is

about who we are and our needs at the moment and into the future. Older residents, people struggling financially, someone with young children, a person with a disability, etc. have different needs and need champions on the council. By making all 12 seats voted on at large (thus accountable to all voters), 1 from each ward and 4 with no residency requirement may give us the best chance to see these voices heard more clearly. And certainly, with a smaller council there will be more accountability and more strategic decisions will be possible. A stronger, better functioning council is what Newton needs now as it is facing many important decisions in the coming years.

Liz Hiser

I'm excited at the prospect of voting in every City Council race and encouraged by the potential of the truly at-large pool of 4 City Council candidates to bring a holistic perspective to their service. I love the diversity of this city and I also love my neighborhood (Newton Highlands). I wouldn't want to live anywhere else. But I am extremely concerned about the divisiveness in Newton that feels like it's been playing out more and more on the basis of geography.

I'll give the rest of my 250 words to Charter Commissioner Howard Haywood:

"If every councilor...was elected from Waban and Newton Centre, (I) wouldn't care if they were looking out for the needs of the city. It's not where they live that matters and it shouldn't matter - it's how they perform their duties.

"It's gotten to the point where the villages are not good for us, it's starting to tear us apart. It's not 13 villages and one city. It's one city of 13 villages. When we put the villages ahead of the entire city, we're doing a disservice. At these meetings (I've) heard a word used a lot, "outlier". But (I'm) an out-

lier here and almost every meeting (I go) to in Newton...But that doesn't matter, does it? What matters is how (I do) the job that (I) was appointed or elected to do. And that's what we should be concerned with. Not where [councilors] come from but whether they represent you." (Charter Commission minutes, 3/29/17)

Kathleen Hobson

My perspective largely derives from my experiences as a housing advocate here, observing and testifying at Council meetings. Twenty-four is too many Councilors. It encourages territoriality and allows village- or neighborhood-specific interests to thwart larger community goals like affordable housing. This is no way to run a city. Twelve seems plenty. The work will naturally shrink, with fewer Councilors, and meetings will be shorter.

I like that all Councilors will be elected citywide. This seems fair, in a city with a population of only 87,000, on 18.2 square miles of land (Boston: 667,000 residents, 48 square miles). We don't only live in our home wards. Our children often go to school in other wards. We shop, work, and play all over the city. Every Newton Councilor, no matter where they live, should be accountable to all the voters.

I like the balance between continuity and innovation, with 8 Ward Councilors and 4 "truly" at-large. It's a very "Newton" solution. It guarantees geographic diversity while incorporating key recommendations of the Model City Charter: only one rep per voting district, all reps elected citywide, and—crucially—that at-large pool, which every other one of the 20 largest Massachusetts cities has. This should give us more contested races (it's amazing how these have diminished over the years) and more opportunity to elect and retain the best people (all 4 seats up for grabs every 2 years; prospective

candidates don't have to challenge effective sitting councilors, to win a seat).

Marcia Johnson

The Charter Commission has worked very hard to find a way to balance the desire for local representation on the part of citizens who advocate for ward councilors elected by the ward, against the need for action across ward boundaries and making councilors accountable to all voters by electing them at large.

Our first charter (1874) created a bicameral legislature: a Board of Aldermen elected from each ward elected at large, and a Common Council with two councilors per ward, elected by ward. The 1897 charter revision combined the two chambers into a 'hybrid' structure: one alderman from each ward elected by ward, and two from each ward elected at large.

Today each ward is represented by three councilors who must reside in the ward. All have an equal vote, even though Ward councilors are elected by a small segment of the population. When conducting business ranging from taxation to spending and zoning. Voters in all wards are not able to hold Ward councilors accountable regardless of how well they may 'represent' the voters in their own ward.

Newton's tradition of having residency requirement for councilors at-large but are elected at large strikes an effective and reasonable balance between local 'connectedness' and citywide accountability. I can emphatically say that citizens, do not naturally go to a ward councilor. Frankly they are not able to differentiate. They typically go to the individual, no matter where they live, who is responsive and takes solid action from a short and longer term perspective.

Anne Larner

Clear, consistent, comprehensive financial reporting is critical for wise decision-making and maintaining a vibrant city. In an effort to institutionalize recent improvements in Newton's financial procedures and provide citizens and local elected officials with consistent, annual financial information, the proposed charter **includes three significant new requirements in Article 5. Financial Procedures. They are:**

1. that the Mayor draft and publish annually a minimum five year forecast of city revenues, expenditures and general financial condition;
2. that the Mayor establish and annually update an inventory of "significant capital assets," leaving the content and form of inventory to be set by ordinance; and
3. that the Council annually provide for the independent audit of all city funds by a certified public accountant in accordance with generally accepted accounting principles with procedures for oversight and management of the audit to be established by ordinance.

In the last 30 years as mayors have changed, inconsistencies and changes in reporting on city finances, budgets, and capital needs have left observers uncertain at times of the condition of the city's physical plant and equipment and ability of the city to provide both an expected level of service to residents and re-investment in capital assets. Much progress has been made recently to enhance transparency, strengthen reporting, and provide more sophisticated tools for prioritizing capital improvements. **The proposed changes to Article 5 will support and strengthen the likelihood that recent positive improvements will be maintained and that continued improvements will be forthcoming.**

Alison Leary

Adopting a smaller city council will increase accountability, require more focus from individual members and be easier for voters to follow and understand. I do think that Newton suffers from a compulsion to micromanage which impedes important decisions from being made in a timely fashion. A smaller council would streamline decision making while still allowing for healthy debate. It would also help ensure that all members participate and do their due diligence on all matters and not just those before their particular committee.

I struggled with the recommendation to have all members elected by all voters because both models have their advantages and disadvantages. It came down to what model I thought would work best for Newton.

The at large model favors members who are more impartial and rise above a parochial perspective. It also encourages councilors to work together to think strategically and not get bogged down in mundane housekeeping tasks.

It makes sense for every representative to be elected on by the whole city. Ward councilors are elected by a small minority of the voters. On the flip side, this low barrier to entry makes it easier for new candidates and those with fewer resources to get elected. But weighing the benefits and disadvantages I would rather have the choice of voting for all the candidates. At large elections may also allow for better qualified candidates because the candidate pool is larger. They also tend to get challenged more which is important to a healthy democratic process. [truncated for length]

Priscilla Leith

The 8 Ward Councilors elected from each ward only by residents of the ward should be retained. Some reasons why:

Residents in each geographic area should have a councilor very familiar with the people, the land, traffic and pedestrian situations, as well as the business leaders and their concerns in their area, so she/he can adequately address needed or proposed changes impacting the ward.

Geographic residency and election by ward is parallel to the representation by district laid out in our state and federal constitutions, and it has worked well over 250 years now.

The costs of running from within a ward vs. at-large should be considered. Within the ward, a candidate can walk, door knock, meet people who live there and get to know their concerns. By ward, it costs much less.

Diversity is important in Newton. Elections at large are more likely to result in mainly white, male, higher income people running and being elected. In Lowell, a city that was 40% minority in 2010 after a new city charter went into effect, of the 9 at-large councilors elected 5 were from a high-income area. The Charter Commission proposal is likely to have the same result in Newton.

Salaries, including health benefits and retirement costs, are likely to increase because with fewer councilors people will want more pay to get work done. City staffing would also need to increase.

Lois Levin

Regarding the elimination of ward-only seats, in the 42 years I have lived in Newton, my ward councilor has never been in a better position to represent me than the two at-large councilors from my ward, except coincidentally; good representation is invariably all about the specific person. In a recent public comment session, I told the Commissioners that it makes not a whit of difference if a councilor lives 2 blocks from me or 22 blocks from me. We are well represented when city councilors are willing and

able to listen and to thoughtfully respond to our concerns, no matter what village they happen to reside in.

Truth is that the majority of voters don't actually know which of the three councilors from their ward happens to be ward-specific, and precious few are able to identify the 8 ward councilors in the list of 24. Both overall and within each ward, Newton is a varied and diverse community currently represented by city councilors we expect to assess the needs of the entire city as they deliberate and cast votes; they will be more responsive to the city as a whole if we adopt the Charter Commission's recommendations.

Susan Mirsky

While I have supported the act of the Charter Commission to reexamine the City Charter, I very much disagree with 1) reducing the size and 2) eliminating the ward Councilor. I feel that the size of the Council allows for diversity, allows more new-comers to enter and allows for more involvement in committees. Why in a true democratic spirit would we limit voices? Thank you

Linda Morrison

Some people think that having a smaller City Council will result in shifting more power towards the executive branch. I believe that the opposite will prove true. A leaner, and more cohesive Council will be able to act as a better counterweight to the mayor. We would all benefit from having only 12 people to listen to on any one issue instead of 24. More people would attend council and committee meetings if they were not so tedious and drawn out, with a resulting increase in citizen participation. Each ward will continue to have a councilor specifically elected from that ward alone (although the entire city would be eligible to vote on the candidates). City decisions would benefit from the removal of seats actually elected by only a few hundred voters.

Newton is an outlier in retaining such an unwieldy legislative body. A smaller Council would enable the body to reach decisions more efficiently and thus be able to balance the mayor's proposals in real time. As it is now, decisions and compromises are often reached only too late to have the desired impacts.

The proposal supports Neighborhood Area Councils.

The new Charter gives better guidance for membership on appointed Boards and Commissions. City employees may serve on any board, committee or commission provided that employees do not comprise more than 1/3 of each such body, and that employees not serve as chairs of such bodies.

Lynn Scheller

I have just a quick comment. I agree that the size of the council should be reduced, but I think it is a mistake to make all of the councilors "at large". I have heard a lot of resistance to this part of the revision and can understand people's reluctance to losing their more direct voice/representation on the board.

Claire Sokoloff & Rob Gifford

As long-time community activists, we have extensive experience interacting with the City Council and strongly support the Commission's proposed new Charter.

A smaller, simplified Council will be more efficient and effective, more transparent and better understood by Newton citizens. Efficient and Effective: We've attended many unnecessarily long, repetitive City Council meetings. With 24 Councilors weighing in, the process is often exasperating. The average citizen gives up, goes home and never returns.

Transparent and Better Understood: Most voters have no idea how our City Council works. When asked, "Who are your City Councilors?" they can

name zero, or at most one. This is as likely to be an at-large Councilor as the one elected solely by the Ward.

The new Charter has one Councilor per Ward, like the School Committee. This person will represent the Ward's interests. People are likely to know their representative, which will help engage them in the political process. All Councilors are elected at-large; they will be held accountable to their ward, while balancing local and citywide interests.

The remaining four members will be elected at-large, in a pool; this will entice new candidates to run who might be reluctant to challenge an incumbent head-to-head. Allegations that these folks will come disproportionately from "wealthy wards" are specious. All wards in Newton have socio-economic diversity; any candidate with a strong message and plenty of energy can fundraise citywide to fuel their campaign.

This is a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity. The proposed Charter is a vast improvement over our current system.

Andrea Steenstrup

I support this charter proposal because I believe the changes it makes are all good for our city. I think 12 is a much more reasonable size for a city council. I feel it is important to be able to vote for the candidates in all seats who represent my values and beliefs, values and beliefs which are not defined by which part of the city I live in.

I hope the LWV supports this charter proposal. The culmination of the League's efforts was the election of nine citizens who were entrusted to come up with the best government for the city of Newton. The commission spent 18 months researching, deliberating, taking input – really working hard and in earnest, to come up with the proposed Charter.

While every commissioner does not agree with every aspect of the charter, they all agree that the new charter is a big improvement over what we have now. One of the beauties of the new charter is that it allows for change and improvement, with a built in review every ten years. If this charter does not pass, it is back to the drawing board, starting with the signatures, and that would be a real shame, since the citizens of Newton clearly were looking for a change. Additionally, the League positions, as created or affirmed by the 2010 Charter Study, appear to be met with the current proposed charter.

Susan Tornheim

I very strongly disagree with the removal of ward councilors elected by their ward. The city of Newton is blessed with a village structure, which gives a smaller-town feeling, a better chance to know your neighbors, and a greater sense of civic involvement. Ward councilors are part of the support system for the villages. When centralization and city-wide approaches are promoted, these weaken the villages and civic life. I feel that the position of ward councilor, each elected only by that ward, should be restored to the charter. Otherwise the proposed changes are unacceptable.

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