

**League of Women Voters of Newton**  
**Annual Meeting – May 30, 2012**  
**Local Program Proposal: Support a Charter Commission**

I am going to speak about the proposal to adopt, as a part of our local program for the coming year, an initiative to actively pursue a Newton Charter Commission, which would be elected at the 2013 Municipal Election. And I want to begin by upholding a portion of the League of Women Voters mission statement.

“The goal of the LWV is to empower citizens to shape better communities worldwide. The LWVUS:

- Acts after study and member agreement to achieve solutions in the public interest on key community issues at all government levels
- Builds citizen participation in the democratic process
- Engages communities in promoting positive solutions to public policy issues through education and advocacy”

Undertaking a signature drive to give the citizens of Newton the opportunity to improve our local government via a charter commission is a great example of

- action based on the League discipline of study and member agreement, of
- building citizen participation in the democratic process, and of
- engaging our community in promoting positive solutions.

We can see the perfect illustration of this when we look back 41 years to the last time Newton’s Charter was significantly revised.

The 1969-71 Charter Commission is a proud part of the history of the LWV of Newton. After a comprehensive Charter Study that concluded in 1967, the League undertook a massive signature drive to force the 1969 ballot question of whether to elect a charter commission. The commission was approved by a margin of 13,000 to 2,500 and gave the citizens of Newton a historic opportunity to improve our local government. The League has always been credited with being the driving force behind that charter revision.

To give you an idea of the significance of the improvements that were achieved in 1971, the previous Charter specified a two-year term for mayor, had no provision for an override of the

mayor's veto, and allowed the Board of Aldermen (BoA) to fill its own vacancies regardless of remaining term. In practice, it was not uncommon for an alderman to run for re-election, resign in January, and allow the BoA to handpick the successor. So, the 1971 Charter brought more power to voters, a more stable executive branch, and stronger checks and balances.

Our present-day charter commission initiative really began three years ago, when we undertook the League discipline of a study of Newton's Charter. As you know, it was a significant undertaking. Thirty-four League members spent nine months on the study, and compared Newton's Charter to the charters of 11 benchmark communities as well as to the Model City Charter, published by the National Civic League. Study members interviewed officials from the benchmark towns, met with a charter expert employed by the Commonwealth of Massachusetts, and researched charter commissions from ten Massachusetts towns dating back to 1999. The study concluded at the 2010 Annual Meeting with the adoption of 14 new positions, five of which can only be effected by a charter commission.

Naturally, the next question to ask is whether any of our League positions are compelling enough to merit the support of a charter commission. Our study concluded that our current government structure has two significant impacts on our city:

- voter apathy and confusion, which leads to less voter engagement and less candidate accountability, and also
- a legislative body that is not as effective as it could be.

Voter Apathy: Our present Charter demands that voters decide in at least 25 contests every two years, which creates a formidable hurdle to having an engaged electorate. And the current configuration of our BoA has an impact on who is willing to run for that office. In addition to a smaller BoA, a charter commission could explore other mechanisms for reducing the number of contests at each election, including 4-year, staggered terms for aldermen and School Committee members.

BoA Effectiveness: If we look at the 21 cities in Massachusetts with a population greater than 50,000 (excluding Boston), Newton has the lowest ratio of legislative representatives per population, with 3,470, which is less than half the average ratio of 7,617. Waltham has the next

largest board with 15 reps. Chicopee and Springfield have 13, and the other 17 cities all have boards of 9 or 11.

Of the 53 total city councils in Massachusetts, the average size is 11, comprised of, on average, 7 ward representatives and 4 at-large. Of cities with ward representatives, Newton is the only city with more than one representative per ward.

Under our current structure, our aldermen have significant involvement with “constituent issues,” which are administrative details that could be handled effectively by the City’s professionals. Our 311 system makes this incredibly easy for residents. A smaller board would force administrative issues to be handled by the City and would free up our aldermen to focus on policy, resource allocation, and strategic, long-term planning rather than potholes and one-way streets.

Whether it was due to the issue of “voter fatigue” or to the perception of ineffectiveness is not known, but the Newton voters were very clear about their disenchantment with the large Board when they approved, in 2000, a resolution to reduce the size of the BoA by a 2-1 margin.

Signature Collection: The work of collecting 8,400 signatures should not be underestimated. However, in a presidential election year, we have a rare opportunity to have 80% of Newton’s registered voters appearing at 32 locations around the City all on one day.

In rough numbers:

- 56,000 registered voters
- 8,400 signatures required (15%)
- With 80% turnout, we would expect 1,400 voters to show up at each precinct.
- We need 265 signatures per precinct, or 19% of those who show up.
- With advance publicity about this effort, we would hope to have voters looking for our volunteers and wanting to sign
- This method of collecting signatures would eliminate the issues of duplicate signatures or signers who are not Newton voters.

The greatest risk of this undertaking would be that voters do not adopt the new charter proposed by a charter commission. Because voters get the final say, we can be fairly certain that if the proposed charter is not an improvement, it won't be implemented.

It's not really a stretch to think that Newton would have a successful charter commission. Success is defined as a commission that puts forth a charter with enough improvement to get adopted by voters. To get there, we need two things:

- A rock-solid process: if voters believe in the process, they will buy into the end product. A strong process has transparency, collaboration/input from all interested parties, and deliberate, clear decision points.
- The second is trickier: we need to avoid a big flaw of the last charter commission, which was that 5 of the 9 members were sitting elected officials... 2 state legislators, 2 school committee members, and 1 alderman. This resulted in too much interest in the status quo. Even the state legislators were unwilling to support downsizing the Board of Aldermen because they felt they needed the support and endorsement of the aldermen in order to be re-elected.

So, we have the benefit of history... the League archives are filled with great information about the last Charter Commission and what made it more and less effective. We also have the benefit of having studied other recent charter commissions and understanding what drove their success or failure. As we do with other public policy issues, the League would use our knowledge to influence the process and encourage an outcome that is best for the citizens of Newton.

Improvements to Newton's form of government are long overdue. Without the League leading the charge, it's not likely to ever happen. Roughly 4 years ago the League was asked to get behind a signature drive effort for a charter commission, and our answer was no, because that effort did not meet the League requirements for study and member agreement. Four years later, we have done our homework, and we should act on the conclusion we reached in our study, for the benefit of the City of Newton.