



## WF CRC re:Cap #2: *December 1, 2020*

**P**ower, accountability, and the public interest were on the docket December 1 (agenda [here](#); link to WCATV recording [here](#)) as both elected and appointed officials continued their examination of the structure and performance of Watertown’s government. Meeting over Zoom, members of the 15-person Charter Review Committee (CRC) sharpened their focus on how well Watertown fulfills its obligations on a range of matters, large and small. They include lack of clarity regarding who’s responsible for what, job performance, and residency requirements, to longer-term systemic puzzles such as how best to restore the power balance between legislative and administrative branches, address non-emergency problems through so-called [311 systems](#) and other kinds of technology infrastructure, and foster a culture of equitable professionalism among administrative, elected, and appointed officials.

### PARADIGM, PURPOSE & PRINCIPLES

CRC members also moved closer to a fuller and deeper discussion of whether Watertown should change its current form of government, from Council–Manager to Council–Mayor, with some members pointing out that the virtue of long-term thinking and visioning, at least through 2030, over short-term fixes.

To facilitate the CRC’s work, Town Council President and CRC Chair **Mark Sideris** announced the appointment of a Communications Subcommittee comprising four people who had volunteered their services: community members **Marcia Ciro**, **Anne Fitzpatrick**, and **Leo Martin**, and Town Councilor **John Gannon**. With Ciro as chair, the subcommittee’s charge is to expand outreach and engagement throughout the increasingly diverse populations of Watertown, with help from Watertown’s new Chief Information Officer, [Chris McClure](#) (whose responsibilities include building better public communication capabilities, such as the [dedicated page](#) for the charter review process), and UMass Boston’s [Edward J. Collins Center for Public Management](#) (under contract with Watertown to assist the process).

Sideris also proposed extending charter review at least through June 30, 2021, at which point the option remains to extend it again. Meanwhile, in a nod to Watertown’s transformation since the first Home Rule Town Charter was adopted in 1980 — with escalating changes in recent years —

### *Did You Know?*

**At Watertown’s (1630) and our nation’s (1776) founding, ideas and professions of liberty and the common good were [embedded in our governance ecosystems](#), however imperfectly. But during the 1800s the “common good” took a back seat. Nowadays, Chelsea’s [Preamble](#) revives it.**

Sideris added that perhaps “we need to look not only at now and today, but also how this is going to affect us in the future. Maybe we should do another review five years from now, so we’re not tied into this for 10 years.”

## POLICY, PROGRAM & PRIORITIES

The meeting was the fourth in a series that began on October 6, 2020 as part of the required decennial charter review. (The pandemic threw the schedule off-course, so the CRC voted to continue its work at

**HOW TO WEIGH IN:** Residents who wish to communicate with the CRC can do so by sending an email to [crc@watertown-ma.gov](mailto:crc@watertown-ma.gov). Questions and responses will be posted on the CRC website.

least through June 30, 2021.) The two-hour session began with discussion of a summary analysis and related documents prepared by the Collins Center team. The [five-page memo](#) set forth two paths — one conceptual, the other more concrete — the CRC could take in discharging

its responsibilities:

- ▶ Review the charter by going through the text — line-by-line or section-by-section — and concentrate on specific topics or problems; *or*
- ▶ Identify and reflect upon broader substantive concepts and then discern how they are, or might be, handled through possible charter changes — including the structure of Watertown’s governance.

Collins Center experts **Mike Ward** (who took questions after making a summary presentation at the CRC meeting) and **Stephen McGoldrick** recommended the latter approach, in part because the text-based focus of Watertown’s previous charter review (in 2010) restricted opportunities to tackle big picture issues. A more conceptual route, they said, enables discussion of these “meta-concerns”, particularly in light of the many and profound demographic, development, and technological changes that have occurred in recent years. Furthermore, using a wider frame helps situate numerous stubborn, interrelated challenges that, taken separately on their own, can be less effective. “It would not make sense to consider minor policy changes whose impacts would be affected or undone by larger issues decided upon afterward,” they wrote.

The CRC decided it will pick which path to pursue by January 31, 2021. In the interim, the Collins team will organize a January panel (also open to the public) comprising current or recent mayors, managers, and councilors who can speak to the risks and opportunities of governance alternatives.

**Themes and focal points** — In their [November 25 follow-up memo](#), the Collins team identified four interrelated themes emerging from their analysis of the previous CRC meetings. Among them:

1. **TRANSPARENCY/COMMUNICATIONS.** There were questions about whether the current form of government provides sufficient transparency and communicates effectively with the public.
2. **RESPONSIVENESS/ACCOUNTABILITY.** There were questions about whether the

government is responsive and accountable to the public.

**3. LEGISLATIVE CAPACITY/BALANCE OF POWER BETWEEN LEGISLATIVE AND EXECUTIVE:**

There were questions about whether the legislative branch as currently structured has the capacity to accomplish what it should be accomplishing and whether the legislative/executive balance of power is optimal.

**4. VISION:** There were questions surrounding what the Town’s vision is, how often it is updated, and whether/how it is being implemented.

**UPCOMING MEETINGS:** The CRC meets at 6:00 p.m. on the first and third Tuesday of each month, well into 2021. The next December meetings will be held on **December 15** and possibly **December 29, 2020**. Sign up for notifications [here](#).

Other materials provided by Collins in preparation for the 12/1 meeting included:

- [A FRAMEWORK OF CRITERIA](#) (revised May 12, 2011) for weighing the benefits and risks of different elected and/or appointed officials;
- [CHARTER SNIPPETS](#) (rev. November 24, 2020) from a handful of other Massachusetts municipalities — including [Amherst](#), [Bridgewater](#), [Chelsea](#), [North Attleborough](#), [East Longmeadow](#), and [Framingham](#) — addressing some of the issues confronting the CRC; and
- [COMPARABILITY DATA](#) (no date) for other Massachusetts cities and towns with populations approximating Watertown’s (*roughly 36,000 in 2018*). The Collins memo cited another chart of Massachusetts cities (rather than towns) that includes compensation data, which is forthcoming.

### PRACTICE, PROCESS & PARTNERS

CRC members devoted most of their time discussing the first two themes, teasing out specific concerns and problems, their wider context, whether or not they were one-off or more deeply rooted, and the nature of remedial action. Many cited examples of poor disclosure and transparency, sporadic or garbled communications, and how well (or not) town administrators (particularly the Town Manager) and both elected and appointed officials respond to public queries and concerns.

CRC members generally agreed that improvements can be made, and supplied different ideas about how that can happen — including whether charter changes are needed, and if so, what form they should take. Some believed that revisions in administrative policy and

practice would do the trick, while others called for a shift in governance structure, expanded or revised job descriptions, beefed up evaluation, and more incentives to boost professional performance.

### *Did You Know?*

**[Participatory Budgeting](#) (“PB”) is a mechanism for involving residents more directly in the budget process. It’s currently in use in [Amherst](#), [Cambridge](#), and [Boston](#).**

Members repeatedly turned to Ward and McGoldrick for guidance on what other cities are doing as models of practice. The wealth of supportive material, along with January's panel discussion, will generate further insights. How transferable they are to Watertown's situation remains unseen.

—by Marcy Murningham

- For more, see Charlie Breitrose, "[Other Town Charters Looked To For Inspiration For Charter Review Committee](#)," *Watertown News*, December 3, 2020.
- For an excellent discussion of the erosion of "common good" principles and vocabulary in American governance, see the recent Town Hall webinar hosted by the National Constitution Center, [What the Founders Learned from the Greeks and Romans](#) (December 3, 2020)