

## **BECAUSE YOU SAY SO . . . REALLY?**

**Bud Morten**

In case you haven't been paying close attention, here is my personal summary of what Fairfield's Charter Revision Commission (CRC) seems to be saying to the public after nine months of work.

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Listen up people!

We are the Charter Revision Commission, chosen by the First Selectwoman and approved by the Board of Selectpersons (BOS).

Here's what you need to know:

We worked really hard.

We held lots of meetings.

We talked with governance experts.

We talked with current and past local and regional public officials.

We talked with our Completely Impartial legal counselor.

We talked with the Town Attorney.

We talked with one another.

We read lots of emails.

We listened to lots of public comments.

We were Completely Open and Transparent . . . uh, even though you may not understand how we were sometimes able to completely change our minds from one meeting to the next with no further public discussion, and even though one of our seven commissioners completely vanished without explanation.

Here's what we decided:

1. You only need 30, not 40, representatives on the Representative Town Meeting (RTM). We are so sure of this that we refused at our final meeting to even discuss the possibility of leaving it at 40. Thirty is actually way more than you need. If we could, we would cut it further or, better yet, replace both the RTM and the BOS with a Town Council and a Mayor and/or Manager. Also, you really shouldn't get to elect all your RTM reps — some reps should get a seat simply because they represent a different political "party" than the others in your districts — but we had to drop that idea after certain acrimonious people unfairly distorted and politicized it at our last public hearing.
2. In the future, a Town Administrator (TA) should run the Town's operations and s/he should be appointed by and report to the First Selectperson (FS).
3. The BOS and the Board of Finance (BOF) should be required to hold some joint budget hearings.
4. There are also a bunch of less important changes about things like Constables and the Tree Warden.

That's it.

We six experts have unanimously agreed on all this, so you don't need any analysis or explanation of the expected benefits, costs, risks and tradeoffs associated with any of our major changes.

After the BOS approves our decisions, you should vote in favor of them in November.

Trust us. Everything will be better, modernized, streamlined, more efficient, more transparent, more accountable, more accessible. Nothing will go wrong. There will be no unintended consequences. We know best. Because we say so.

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**The most important flaw in the CRC's proceedings has been their presumption that if the six of them agree and if they think they can get public approval, there is no need for any analysis of all the expected benefits, costs, risks and tradeoffs associated with their recommendations.**

**However, the purpose of the CRC was not to get these six people to agree on what should be changed; the purpose was to have them analyze whether any changes in our governance system would be beneficial and if so, to explain clearly to us the rationale for any recommendations.**

Here are some examples of important issues the CRC failed to analyze and explain to the public.

**Size of RTM:** Why will a smaller RTM be better for Fairfield; why and how will it be “more accountable” rather than less accountable, and “better able” to address the Town's many issues? What exactly are the problems being solved and how significant are they? Are any of these problems more likely attributable to a lack of adequate staff and legal support for the RTM? How should we evaluate the performance of the RTM? What bad things have happened or will happen to Fairfield because its RTM is too big, even though some highly successful towns like Greenwich and Darien have much larger RTMs? What benefits do we obtain from a larger RTM that will be lost? For example, would a smaller RTM adversely affect the Civic Culture of our community? How should we weigh the relative importance of all these and other benefits, costs and risks? Subject to learning more, I personally believe the RTM should remain at 40 members.

**Town Administrator:** The objective of this change is to provide more professional operating management for our Town and allow the FS to focus more on strategic matters. The question is whether the TA should be appointed by and report to the FS, which is how things work today with the Town's Chief Administrative Officer and Chief Fiscal Officer. The FS is our Town's CEO, and both private- and public-sector CEOs (e.g., Governors and Presidents) are almost always allowed to appoint their own executive teams and cabinets. And, over time, different FS will bring different skill sets, experience, personalities and strategic priorities to the job, so they should presumably have the flexibility to choose a TA that will best complement and support their agenda rather than, in the worst case, obstruct it. On the other hand, maybe the TA should be appointed by and report to the BOS? Indeed, in other towns, the Town Manager usually reports to a Town Council rather than to the Mayor or FS. And our Superintendent of Schools is appointed by and reports to the BOE, which seems to work pretty well. Reporting to the FS definitely makes the TA role more political and would limit the candidate pool to those willing to accept what could be only a four-year term. Frequent TA turnover would also mean that we never get the full benefit of long-term professional management based on long-term institutional knowledge and relationships. I personally can't decide yet which is best and want to learn more.

**Budget Process:** Why should we mandate that the BOS and the BOF must hold some joint budget hearings? Why not simply encourage them to continue to adopt by mutual agreement whatever budget hearing process they feel is most constructive? Subject to learning more, I personally believe the Charter should not dictate what the BOS and BOF must do with regard to their budget hearings.

In conclusion, the CRC's recommendations will soon be voted on by the BOS, and I urge you to tell them what you think, whether you agree with me or not: [bos@fairfieldct.org](mailto:bos@fairfieldct.org). This is your 383-year-old town.

Bud Morten  
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