

Town of Jamestown 2022-2023 Jamestown Charter Review Committee

Final Report to the Town Council

The 2022-2023 Town Charter Review Committee consisting of seven (7) voting member: James Rugh, Chairman; Sav Rebecchi, Vice Chairman; Job Toll, Secretary; Lucia Marshall; Mary E. Meagher; James (Jay) Sisson; and George Souza was charged with reviewing the Charter to determine if there are any changes needed. The Committee met bi-weekly and researched and discussed various possible Charter changes. Our eleven recommended changes are presented to the Council for consideration.

In this report recommended text changes are highlighted, additions are underlined, and deletions are struck through. Identical changes to multiple sections are presented together.

RECOMMENDATION 1

In November 2020 voters in Rhode Island passed a ballot measure to drop the words “Providence Plantations” from the official state name. We recommend that the preamble be changed to conform to the current official state name.

PREAMBLE

The people of the Town of Jamestown, in order to secure the right of self-government in all local matters, pursuant to the provisions of the constitution of the State of Rhode Island ~~and Providence Plantations~~, do adopt and establish this Charter.

RECOMMENDATION 2

After considerable research and discussion, the committee recommends the Town move to non-partisan elections for the Town Council, School Committee and Town Moderator. Several other Rhode Island cities and towns have moved to non-partisan local elections (the Town has no control over state and Federal elections) including Newport and Middletown, to name just two.

Sec. 201. - Number, selection, term

The town council shall consist of five members elected from the town at large, each to serve for a term of two years or until a successor is elected and qualified. The regular election of council members shall be held on the first Monday of November

in even-numbered years, beginning November 2012. The names of all candidates for town council who shall have qualified to appear on the ballot shall be listed ~~under their respective~~ without party designations (in the order determined by the board of canvassers by the drawing of lots). Each elector shall vote for no more than five candidates for town council, and the five receiving the greatest number of votes shall be declared elected.

PLEASE NOTE: Under the Jamestown Town Charter, sections 601 and 602, primary, general, and special elections and the authority granted the canvassing authority are governed by Rhode Island General Law 1956, §§ 17-1-1 et seq, 17-8-1 et seq., and 45-4-1et seq. The Committee suggests that the Town Solicitor be consulted to determine if further additions to the Charter may be needed to move to local non-partisan elections. For this reason, we suggest the 2022-2023 Town Charter Review Committee not be discharged until the Town Solicitor makes his report, in case additional changes to the Charter are needed.

RECOMMENDATION 3

This recommendation mirrors recommendation 2 and would make local school board elections non-partisan.

Sec. 501 – School committee membership.

There shall be a school committee of five members, each of whom shall be elected at large from the town by the electors of the town of Jamestown at the regular town election to serve for a term of four years and until the successor is elected and qualified. The names of all candidates for the school committee who shall have qualified to appear on the ballot shall be listed ~~under their respective~~ without party designation (in the order determined by the board of canvassers by the drawing of lots). Those persons receiving the greatest number of votes for an office, not exceeding the number of persons to be chosen for the office, shall be declared elected to office. All members of the school committee in office at the time this Charter is adopted shall continue to hold office until their normal terms have expired.

RECOMMENDATION 4

We are recommending two changes to section. 406. The change in the first paragraph would mirror recommendations 2 and 3 and would make the Town Moderator election non-partisan.

Currently, at the Town Financial Meeting the Town Moderator can call for a ballot vote on any issue. Voters at the meeting can make a motion from the floor to vote by ballot. We believe many voters are reluctant to take a public position or to speak publicly at this meeting. Our recommendation is to require a ballot vote on the expenditure of money or the incurring of liability in excess of \$1 million. This limit would exempt most bond issues. Had this been in effect at the 2023 Town Financial Meeting it would only have required a ballot on the Town and School budgets. Other cities and towns have a similar provision and we believe many registered voters will support this change.

Sec. 406. - Town moderator.

There shall be a town moderator, who shall be elected at the regular town election without party designation and shall have those powers and perform those duties prescribed now or in the future by the constitution and laws of the state not inconsistent with this Charter. In the event that the office of the town moderator becomes vacant during the term of office, the town council will appoint a replacement until the next regularly scheduled election.

The moderator of the Town Financial Meeting shall upon a motion being made and seconded, relative to any business before such meeting, after having heard all the registered voters thereon who shall be desirous of being heard, cause the votes of the registered voters present to be taken thereon. Whenever any question involves an expenditure of money, or the incurring of liability in excess of \$1 million by the Town, or the disposition of Town property in excess of \$1 million, that vote shall be taken by ballot.

RECOMMENDATION 5

Under section 212, when a member of the Town Council leaves the council because they cease “to meet the qualifications established in section 202” (must be a qualified elector, a residents of the Town, and hold no other public office or employment in the service of the town) the Council appoints the next higher vote getter. However, there may be no next higher vote getter or that person could have only received a few votes. In addition, section 212 does not address when a Council members resigns for other reasons. We recommend eliminating the current wording and replacing with wording allowing the Town Council to fill an open position with a “qualified person.”

Sec. 212. - Vacancies.

Vacancies shall be said to exist when any member ceases to meet the qualifications established in section 202. If such a vacancy occurs in the membership of the town

council, the remaining members of the town council shall appoint the next highest vote getter to fill the vacancy until the next regularly scheduled biennial election.

If a vacancy occurs in the membership of the council, for whatever reason, the remaining members of the council shall select a qualified person to fill the vacancy until the next regularly scheduled state or town election, at which time the electors shall elect a qualified person to complete any unexpired portion of the term.

RECOMMENDATION 6

Section 503 outlines the process to follow when a member of the School Board leaves the Board. The process is similar to that now followed when a vacancy occurs on the Town Council. The same concerns apply and we recommend mirroring changes recommended to section 212.

Sec 503 – Vacancies.

Any vacancy in the membership of the school committee shall be filled by the town council by the next highest vote getter from the most recent election and so on until someone fills the vacancy until the next regular town election, when the office shall be filled for the unexpired term thereof. Should there be no next higher vote getter or if none of the vote getters be willing to serve then the council shall appoint a member, pursuant to the laws of the State of Rhode Island.

If a vacancy occurs in the membership of the school committee, for other than the expiration of the member's term, the town council shall select a qualified person to fill the vacancy to serve until the next regularly scheduled state or town election, at which time the electors shall select a qualified person to complete the unexpired portion of the term.

RECOMMENDATION 7

We are recommending changes to section 216 that would allow a “digest or description which substantially expresses the purpose or identifies the subject matter” of a proposed ordinance or amendment to be published in a general circulation newspaper rather than the full text. This is permitted by state law and would result in significant savings to the Town. Many of today's ordinances/amendments are complex, for example the short-term rental ordinance. These can run multiple newspaper pages and cost thousands of dollars per insertion. If this recommendation is adopted a more concise digest of the ordinance or amendment could be published. So that Jamestown voters can read and understand the ordinance/amendment we recommend making it

clear that the full text must be posted on the Town web site and available for public inspection at the Town Clerk's Office.

Sec. 216. - Procedure for adopting ordinance.

An ordinance or amendment to an existing ordinance may be introduced by any member at any regular or special meetings of the town council. Upon introduction of any ordinance or amendment to an existing ordinance, the town clerk shall distribute a copy to each town council member and to the town administrator; shall file a reasonable number of copies in the office of the town clerk and shall publish the ordinance or amendment. It shall not be necessary for the full text of an ordinance or amendment to an ordinance to be published. The Council may approve a digest or description which substantially expresses the purpose or identifies the subject matter. Following the publication by at least seven days, the town council may adopt the ordinance with or without amendment or reject it, but if it is amended as to any matter of substance, the town council may not adopt it until the ordinance or its amended sections have been subjected to all the procedures hereinbefore required in the case of a newly introduced ordinance. As soon as practicable after adoption of any ordinance, the town clerk shall have sufficient printed copies of the ordinance or amendment available at the town hall.

As used in this section, the term "publish" means to print in one or more newspapers of general circulation in the town. The full ordinance or amendment shall be posted and to post on the town's website: (1) the complete ordinance or amendment and (2) the places where copies of it have been filed and the times when they are and shall be made available at the Town Clerk's office for public inspection.

RECOMMENDATION 8

Section 301 deals with the appointment of the town administrator. Candidates are permitted six months to become a resident of the state of Rhode Island. Finding suitable housing in Rhode Island is becoming more challenging. In light of current housing conditions, we recommend expanding this time to twelve months.

Sec. 301. - Appointment and qualifications.

The town council shall appoint a town administrator for an indefinite period of time, based solely upon the executive and administrative qualifications of the applicant, as outlined by generally accepted professional standards. The town administrator need not be a resident of the town or state at the time of appointment, but must

become and remain a qualified elector and resident of the state within ~~six~~ twelve months after appointment, unless an extension is approved by town council. The relationship between the town and the town administrator shall be contractual and not that between a municipality and a civil officer.

RECOMMENDATION 9

Currently the building official may serve as the minimum housing inspector, a position mandated by state law. The building official is also responsible for supervision and enforcement of ordinances relating to buildings, zoning, trailer parks and other matters. We feel that zoning enforcement is a critical function and should be more prominent. We recommend that “zoning” be deleted from the list of supervision and enforcement duties and that wording be added that states he may also serve as the zoning enforcement official.

Sec. 409. - Building.

There shall be a building official who shall be nominated by the town administrator with the approval of the town council and shall be responsible for the supervision and enforcement of ordinances relating to buildings, ~~zoning~~, trailer parks and other matters assigned to the building official pursuant to law. The building official may also serve as the ~~zoning enforcement officer and the~~ minimum housing inspector. In the absence of a town engineer, the building official shall be responsible for the custody and proper maintenance of engineering records including surveys, plans, maps and the like, pertaining to town property and projects.

RECOMMENDATION 10

We are recommending two housekeeping changes to section 1104 which requires that the Town budget and capital budget be printed and available 14 days in advance of the financial town meeting. In 2002 sections 223 and 224 we deleted and replace with section 1102 and 1103. At the time section 1104 was not corrected to indicate the proper sections. For the sake of accuracy, we recommend these changes be made to section 1104.

Sec. 1104. Public notice.

The recommended budget (section ~~223~~ 1102) and capital budget as provided in section ~~224~~ 1103 shall be printed and available to the public at least 14 days preceding the annual financial town meeting-

RECOMMENDATION 11

Our final recommendation is to clarify in section 1201 that there are two types of charter reviews. A full review which by the current charter occurs every six years, and a special review that can take place as needed (the most recent special review took place in 2020 to update section 219 – Initiative Petition). The committee felt that there could be confusion regarding the date of full review since it could be a year or more from the call for a committee to the submission of a final report. To eliminate any question, our recommendation is to make the appointment of the next full charter review committee September 1, 2029 and full reviews every six years from that date. (September 1 was selected as it would allow the committee to meet during the fall/winter/spring and avoid the summer with it can be a challenging getting a quorum).

Sec. 1201. - Charter revision committee.

The town council shall appoint a charter review committee to review this Charter whenever it is deemed necessary but not longer than six years from the previous review. The town council shall appoint a special charter review committee whenever it is deemed necessary. The council shall appoint a full charter review committee beginning September 1, 2029, and every six years from that date. The Town Clerk shall inform the Council no less than six months before the next Full Review to begin the process of review committee selection. Said full review committee shall within nine months of its appointment submit to the town council a report with its recommendations for amendments, additions or deletions.

Submitted by the 2022-2023 Jamestown Charter Review Committee:

James Rugh, Chairman
Sav Rebecchi, Vice Chairman
Job Toll, Secretary
Lucia Marshall
Mary E. Meagher
James (Jay) Sisson
George Souza

July 11, 2023