

MINUTES

SELECT COMMITTEE ON SIZE AND ELECTION OF COUNCIL

THE MEETING WAS HELD IN THE AV ROOM #308 IN CITY HALL.

5:30 P. M., NOVEMBER 9, 2023

Jennifer Pharr, Chair, called the meeting of the Select Committee on Size and Election of Council to order at 5:30p.m., November 9, 2023.

Committee Members Present:

Mary Beth Hoover (over Zoom)
Sam Minardi
Emmett Pepper
Jennifer Pharr
Chad Robinson
Jonathan Frazier

Members Absent:

Chuck Overstreet
Karen Williams
Mark Davis

Other Councilmember Present:

Joe Solomon
Beth Kerns

A roll call was taken, and it was determined that a quorum was present.

1. APPROVAL OF PREVIOUS MINUTES

Councilmember Robinson motioned to approve the previous minutes from 10-25-2023. Councilmember Minardi seconded the motion. With those being present having voted unanimously in the affirmative, the Chair declared the minutes as approved.

2. UPDATES/DISCUSSION

- Update from City Attorney Kevin Baker regarding data from the Municipal League concerning the size of other municipalities

Baker shared the information gathered by the Municipal League that listed cities in West Virginia, their population, Council size and population per Councilmember. There are about 8 cities that have a higher population per Councilmember than Charleston.

- Memo presentation from Councilmember Pepper concerning the size of other municipalities

Councilmember Pepper added that Charleston has a larger than average City Council, regardless of population size (being the 7th or 13th in the country). Of interest are the "Neighborhood Advisory Commissions" that cities like DC have. These groups do not have voting power, but do have some amount of power and formal recognition. He added that Charleston has the highest population per Councilmember in the County. Councilmember Pepper added that most Councils are either all At-Large or all Ward-based.

From the audience, Councilmember Kerns asked if he had done any research on full-time versus part-time Councilmembers and pay. Councilmember Pepper replied that he didn't specifically focus on that.

Councilmember Pharr added that she found the Super Districts to be interesting, as well as the data from Massachusetts and Connecticut.

- Discussion regarding cost of Charleston City Council

Baker shared a memo from the Finance Director, Andy Wood, showing the various costs of City Council. He noted that insurance was the highest contribution the City made.

Chief of Staff, Matt Sutton, added that the budget assumes that every Councilmember will take the City's insurance. Presently 18/26 currently have City insurance. Councilmember Pepper confirmed that Councilmembers who did not take City insurance would therefore cost less than those that did. Baker added that the cost would also depend on which insurance plan was chosen. Councilmember Pharr confirmed that the current budgeted cost for each Councilmember was \$16,856.

Councilmember Pharr asked if other cities in West Virginia provided health insurance to Councilmembers. Baker did not know, and Sutton replied that they probably did not.

Councilmember Pepper confirmed that changing the insurance provided to Councilmembers could be done with it going on a ballot. Frazier asked how funds allocated in the budget for insurance that were not used worked. Baker replied that unused funds would go in the Unassigned Fund Balance (surplus). Frazier confirmed that Councilmembers have been given the opportunity to take City insurance for a very long time.

Councilmember Pepper added that Councilmembers felt different than employees in that they received what was basically a stipend for their service. Councilmember Minardi added that Councilmembers weren't doing this to make money, but the City would want to attract quality people to run for office, insurance being an enticing perk. Councilmember Robinson pointed out that Councilmembers with insurance do pay premiums just like every other employee. Councilmember Hoover added that the previous City insurance was more expensive, and that most of her paycheck went to the premium. She doubted that anyone was running for City Council for the insurance/pay. However, she thought it was a great perk that they should not get rid of. It doesn't bother her if Councilmembers take the insurance or not. Councilmember Pharr agreed that she liked that insurance was an option. Councilmember Pepper confirmed that approximately 84% of insurance costs are covered by the City for all employees, including Councilmembers.

Councilmember Pharr agreed that it would be helpful to look into full-time versus part-time pay as well as any other benefits with other municipalities.

- Discussion regarding bipartisan elections

Baker added that the cost of the last election was approximately \$70,000 for the Primary Election and \$77,000 for the General Election. Councilmember Robinson pointed out that there would only be savings with a bi-partisan election if every elected position was changed to be non-partisan, including the Mayor, City Treasurer, etc. Councilmember Minardi added that cost savings was only one part of the consideration. Mayor Goodwin added that it is widely agreed that Party politics does not usually play a role in this level of government.

From the audience, Councilmember Solomon added that one of the benefits of parties is that that can offer accountability of voting within that Party's platform.

Councilmember Pepper added that Detroit had an open Primary Elections. Baker replied that would require a West Virginia State Law change, but might be possible through Home Rule.

- Updates from Committee Members

Councilmember Minardi added that term limits was brought up at the last meeting. Councilmember Pharr agreed that it would be a good topic to discuss. Councilmember Pharr confirmed that the Legislature did not have term limits. Baker added that the only term limits in West Virginia are the Governor and Sherrif, which is 2 terms. Baker added that adding term limits would require a change of the Charter. Councilmember Robinson added that term limits are usually set for Congress etc., not lower-level elected officials. Councilmember Pepper agreed that he wasn't a big fan of term limits for Council positions. Frazier added that he was in favor of some type of term limits, and it would prevent a stagnant city.

Councilmember Solomon added it would be good to have resources on the City's web page that explained how to run for office.

Councilmember Phar added that they needed to hear from the public. Councilmember Minardi added that they should also accept written comment or polls as well. Councilmembers Pharr and Pepper agreed that there should be specific topics when gathering public opinion. The Committee decided to have at least one more meeting before any public hearings. Councilmember Robinson added that he would prefer written forms over public ones. Councilmember Pharr added that there needed to be a way to ensure actual residents were filling out the forms.

Councilmember Pepper motioned that the Chair give Council a report on the Committee by the last Council meeting of the year. Councilmember Minardi seconded the motion. With those being present having voted unanimously in the affirmative, the Chair declared the motion approved.

- Next date to meet and potential topics for next meeting

The Committee decided that the next meeting would be January 11, 2024, at 5:30.

Councilmember Minardi motioned to adjourn the meeting.
Meeting adjourned.