



CITY OF SOMERVILLE, MASSACHUSETTS
JOSEPH A. CURTATONE
MAYOR

MEMORANDUM

TO: SOMERVILLE CHARTER ADVISORY COMMITTEE
FROM: JOSEPH A. CURTATONE, MAYOR
SUBJECT: CHARTER REVISIONS
DATE: 10/28/2008

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Charter review process offers the City an opportunity to overhaul a convoluted and outdated document by: 1) eliminating antiquated elements; 2) removing inflexible requirements; and 3) integrating best practices. The resulting Charter should guide City operations toward optimal levels of efficiency and effectiveness, while also increasing overall transparency and accountability.

Based on these principles, and on the Committee's considerations to this point, I hereby offer three recommendations regarding specific changes to the Charter:

- **Structure of City Departments** - *I recommend that the Committee identify a method by which the City's administrative structure can be both clearly delineated and easily amended.*
- **Listing of Boards & Commissions** - *I recommend that the Committee emphasize the importance of civic engagement and provide the City with the ability to create or amend committees, task forces, and advisory boards as needed.*
- **Professional Management** - *I recommend that the committee stress the need, in general terms, for professional management and, just as important, analytic capability to be instilled into the government's operations.*

My department heads or I will offer further recommendations as needed throughout the process and are always available to testify before the committee as well.

BACKGROUND

First, let me thank all of you for assisting in the City's first serious attempt to update its Charter in over ten years. The task you have undertaken is as important as it is difficult. Indeed, I have followed your discussions to date and have been impressed both by the breadth and thoughtfulness of your work. I look forward to receiving your eventual recommendations.

My administration, along with the Board of Aldermen and our state Delegation, has worked hard in recent years to completely overhaul and modernize our management practices, delivery of services, customer service and to ensure transparency and accountability throughout City government. Throughout this effort we have found that the City Charter often offers as much hindrance as it does guidance. Accordingly, I view the crafting of a new charter as an opportunity to achieve three important tasks:

- **Elimination of antiquated elements:** The Charter is rife with outdated components and requirements. Some, such as the election of a City messenger, are simply anachronistic and reflect the needs of different era. Others, such as determining wards based on the number of male voters, clearly violate state or federal laws.
- **Removal of inflexible requirements:** Due to existing Charter components, the City has been forced to submit dozens of Home Rule Petitions to the state legislature in order to make changes to City management and operations. These Petitions can take months or even years to pass through Beacon Hill and can distract from more critical state-wide issues.
- **Integration of best practices:** My Administration has consistently sought to adopt the successful systems and processes of other state and local communities. Similarly, due to our smaller size and success with implementation, we have been contacted or visited by numerous municipalities. This Charter review process poses an excellent opportunity to assess nationwide trends and analysis and further integrate best practices.

RECOMMENDATIONS

I have charged the City Solicitor, along with Charter Committee staff, to identify all outdated aspects of the current document to insure their exclusion from a new version. Below, I recommend implementing an administrative code component to the Charter to provide the flexibility needed to govern effectively. I look to Committee members to identify best practices both from their own experience and from research performed by staff. I will also comment as needed on specific proposals raised by the Committee.

I hope that you will take this information into account moving forward. In each case, the suggestions are designed to increase the flexibility of our city government and, in turn, promote further efficiency and effectiveness as well as increased transparency and accountability.

If you would like to discuss these recommendations further, I am happy to answer any questions or to appear before the committee.

- **Inflexible requirement - Structure of City departments:** Although the current charter declares that “the executive powers of the city shall be vested solely in the mayor (Title 4, Section 20),” the inclusion of specific departments and positions in the Charter hampers the implementation of this authority.

Because the Charter lists specific administrative components, the City has to go to the legislature to create new positions, alter the existing organization of departments, or even to change the names of departments. For example, the City had to submit a Home Rule Petition to the legislature in order to create the position of Constituent Services Director. The City also had to go to the legislature in order to combine functional divisions within the Department of Public Works.

Therefore, I recommend that the Committee identify a method by which the City’s administrative structure can be both clearly delineated and easily amended.

- **Inflexible requirement – Listing of Boards & Commissions:** Under the existing Charter, the City is required to appoint a variety of boards and commissions that are no longer relevant to urban management. Among these are the Board of Public Welfare and the Listing Board (charged with visiting every house in the city during the first twenty days of January.) Even those entities that are still active, such as the Board of Health, are limited by the powers ascribed to them. When we sought to combine Health and Inspectional Services inspectors, for example, we were again forced to file a home rule petition. While this change was designed to dramatically improve coordination and efficiency across enforcement entities, it instead resulted in a two year legislative process that detracted from state and local priorities.

Therefore, I recommend that the Committee emphasize the importance of civic engagement and provide the City with the ability to create or amend committees, task forces, and advisory boards as needed.

- **Integration of Best Practice - Professional Management**
I agree with the sentiments of the Committee that municipalities should continue moving toward a professionalization of management. Cities are complex entities with myriad operational, financial, and staffing components. My administration has made an unprecedented commitment to improving management and analysis by creating a SomerStat department charged with implementing relentless follow-up on tasks designed to improve both the effectiveness and efficiency of our governance. The benefits of the program have vastly outweighed its meager costs. While I hope SomerStat has become institutionalized in our City’s administration, and despite its lauded successes, I would not want a specific program or job title added to the Charter. A different mayor may need a different tool, or different eras may require a different approach.

Rather, I recommend that the committee stress the need, in general terms, for professional management and, just as important, analytic capability to be instilled into the government’s operations.