

Clean and Open Elections Task Force

Meeting Notes, March 1, 2018

I. Participation

In attendance

Joe Beckmann, Nate Clauser, Ariel Horowitz, Andrew Levine, Sara Oaklander, Nick Salerno, J.T. Scott, Eric Weisman

Not in attendance

Annie Connor, Vishal Doshi, Josh Rosmarin

II. March 13th Meeting

Nate, Ariel, Josh, and JT can't attend – we are looking to reschedule and have sent a Doodle to find appropriate dates

III. Candidate Experience – J.T. Scott

Notes will capture broad themes – J.T. will follow up with more numbers, facts, and figures

Are there barriers stopping potential candidates from running (both under the city's control and not)? How hard was it to "get into the game?"

JT introduced four broad requirements/barriers that served as obstacles to running:

- **Knowledge**
 - Individuals need to be engaged enough with the political process to realize the various ways to be active in local governing, including that running for office is even an option. Not everyone gets this exposure for various reasons.
 - Resources exist – including trainings/workshops - to provide potential candidates with the knowledge to run, including through the city's election office. Information and tools from that office could be considered adequate, but there are areas for improvement.
 - It isn't clear whose responsibility it is to help community members become aware of the option to run for office and how to then become a candidate
- **Time**
 - Campaigning is a full time job. Not everyone can take that time.
 - There is a structural time barrier in that dedicating the time required to running for office comes at great cost related to the impact on ability to hold a paying job at the same time.
- **Uncertainty**
 - People don't always know how long they'll be able to afford to live in Somerville – particularly if they are renters. This uncertainty relates to the period of the election but also to the question of being around to serve a full two-year term.

- **Cost**

- \$18k was a low-cost campaign for alderman. \$40k was at the high end. Stephanie Hirsch raised (and spent?) over \$50k.
- Childcare expenses are not a valid expense that can be paid for through fundraising, based on state law. Likewise, personal food and lodging are not valid expenses
- Somerville is an expensive city in which to live – many people can't quit jobs to run
- Candidates ask themselves if they can raise enough money to be elected
 - Campaign managers paid 1k a month, which is not a living wage
 - Mayoral elections extremely expensive - \$380,000 was raised/spent (?) running virtually unopposed. Over \$130,000 was spent on campaign consultants. While much goes into campaign costs like consultants and mailings, more goes into relationship building throughout the mayoral term...raising the question: What would it cost to lead a competitive mayoral campaign in Somerville, especially against an incumbent? Do we want it to be an office that requires that much fundraising?

Additional key points:

- Lack of accountability stemming from uncontested elections
- Holding local elections in odd years – apart from state and national elections – results in local elections not getting as much attention

J.T. also shared his sense of the structural barriers that exist to being able to successfully exercise the role of Alderman.

- Pay for Aldermen – 40K a year.
- The role often impedes ability to get other employment due to conflict of interest laws AND a lack of time due to the demands of the office (10-20 hours a week at office, 10-20 hours of constituent services, 10-40 hours of preparation)
- Language as a barrier – parliamentary procedure is difficult even for native English speakers and creates additional obstacles for English Language Learners to be effective in office
- Elements of law that are a part of elected office – means there is more context and legal language to learn that makes it difficult to serve
- Board of Aldermen have no paid staff or any infrastructure such as budget for supplies, including no independent legal counsel

IV. Discussion re: ways to impact the number and diversity of candidates and, subsequently, of those holding elected office

- Tools and resources from the Elections office
 - Opportunities for improvements in content and process?
 - Does city want to be in the business of offering training to potential candidates?

- Cost of running for office - Can the city make the races cost less?
 - Length of campaign can be regulated – shorter electoral cycle (e.g. “snap” elections)...although could result in even fewer and less diverse candidate pool
 - Making living expenses, childcare expenses, etc. eligible to be paid by campaign funds is a possibility – requiring a state level change
 - Could have free or inexpensive public child care - would make running for office more feasible for parents of young children

- Difficulties for officeholders after winning election (money, time, etc.)
 - Board of Aldermen have no paid staff/infrastructure/independent legal counsel
 - Pay level - If position were considered a full-time job and paid accordingly, would it attract more candidates? E.g., Cambridge City Councilors are paid more. What about other cities we typically compare ourselves to?
 - Other support services/resources – E.g., Cambridge City Councilors have paid staff. What about other comparable cities?
 - The Board has taken action to secure independent counsel from the City
 - Concerns re increasing support to the Board when union staff have not been able to secure raises
 - *Later comment:* Might we undertake a survey to offer comparison as argument for increased resources?)
 - Housing cost and stability

- Issues of transparency and civic engagement
 - Campaign finance transparency is pretty much covered now by OCPF
 - What prompts engagement? When people feel that involvement matters, makes a difference to them.
 - Consider ways to engage people in the “narrative” of their community/neighborhood (smaller area) vs. the city as a whole
 - Increase civic/political literacy: *goal is that every resident knows and understands what is going on in the City and why it matters*
 - Increase the availability of information that is pushed out by the City – pushing civic literacy is likely to encourage civic engagement. Are civics taught in school here in Somerville?
 - No newspaper in Somerville anymore – local issues reach fewer people

- Political literacy program similar to other campaigns (e.g., vaccinations)
- Providing information about the Board of Aldermen, Board meetings, etc. in plainer language and in a more accessible form (e.g., recruit Tufts students to digest the content of Board meetings and make it available in more same + new ways)
- Move municipal elections to be the same time as state and federal elections
 - Pros and cons – More people vote in state/federal election, but will people be focused enough on municipal issues to make an informed choice?
- Other ways cities invest in transparency/civic engagement...some in ways that don't necessarily serve status quo?
 - Participatory Budgeting – *Andrew will check on level of participation and who is eligible to participate (e.g., age, non-citizens?)*
 - Lots of new tools to collect voter ideas – “ActionPath” – but do these result in decision fatigue when combined with the frequency with which we are asked by large corporations (e.g., Google, retail, more) to engage and give opinions?
- Building a pipeline for candidate engagement would require overcoming some of these structural barriers
 - What policies are less focused at the electoral system, and more on structural/systems change and creating more social equity and, therefore, electoral equity?
 - Neighborhood Council was started as a possible pipeline

V. *What is the potential scope of our recommendations?*

- Broader societal questions aren't really in our charge, but they're relevant
- Looking for recommendations that will make the biggest impact at a lower cost. Doing anything on the candidate side is difficult.
- The biggest leverage moves would be to
 - move our local elections to even years such that they coincide with state and federal elections
 - provide municipal campaign financing