Charter Changes Will Weaken Democracy, Not Strengthen It

Unfortunately, the democratic solution is not before the voters on Tuesday. What voters are asked to approve on November 3rd is a process that can be characterized at best as a sham, and at worst, a cynical attempt to prevent the people from voting on the budget at all.

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Question 4: *Shall the Charter be amended to revise the procedure for the conducting of the annual town meeting and the adoption of the annual town budget?*

The Charter Revision Commission originally recommended that a minimum of three hundred taxpayers vote at the budget meeting in order for a budget to pass. If there were not 300 taxpayers voting, the budget vote would automatically go to referendum. This is a quorum requirement that would undoubtedly become a tool used by factions to manipulate the budget process and make a sham of the town meeting.

Several well-attended public hearings made it clear that the overwhelming majority supported an automatic adjournment to referendum after discussion on the budget and rejected the quorum requirement, understanding the potential discord and inconsistency that would result.

So how did the Charter Revision Commission and the Board of Selectmen respond? They made changes that further restrict the rights of voters!

This proposal requires 300 hundred people to only check-in to the budget meeting. This tortured definition of a quorum does not require those who check in to stay or even vote on the budget. Therefore, if everybody but one person leaves before the end of the meeting, that one person can decide the budget. Ridiculous.

It gets worse (and more complicated). If 300 people do not check-in, the budget will automatically go to referendum. Or 2/3 of the number of people present can vote to adjourn the meeting to a referendum. Can you imagine the manipulation of these two procedures? Check in/don't check in/ check in then leave/go/don't go/go then leave... Confusing best describes it.

Until 1997, the selectmen thought that it was important that more citizens have the right to vote on the budget. Eight of the nine previous budget referendums were called by the selectmen, NOT by citizen petition. Then in 1997, selectmen rejected a budget referendum petition. It was the first time in years that the people were not permitted to vote on the budget at a referendum or by absentee ballot. Many senior citizens, working citizens, out of town taxpayers and the physically challenged were unable to vote.

The Charter should be expanded to include adjourning the town meeting to referendum after the amendment process. This would let citizens attend the town meeting to propose amendments, support or oppose the amendments, and vote on any budget changes prior to adjournment to referendum. This solution is the best of both worlds. It permits and encourages citizens with a heightened interest in the budget process to attend the town meeting and craft the budget and it provides the opportunity for all citizens to vote on the final budget by referendum and by absentee ballot.

Citizens expressed their views at several public hearings. Their collective experience and insight into the importance of the town meeting and the democratic principle of enfranchisement was ignored. The Charter Revision Commission and the Board of Selectmen chose to limit and restrict participation rather than broaden it.

Unfortunately, the democratic solution is not before the voters on Tuesday. What voters are asked to approve on November 3rd is a process that can be characterized at best as a sham, and at worst, a cynical attempt to prevent the people from voting on the budget at all.

Question 3: *Shall the Charter be amended to establish a Board of Finance?*

Charter Revision Commission members think that the Board of Selectmen is overworked and overwrought by having to deal with the finances of the town as well as other matters. In other words, some suggest the selectmen have too much on their plates.

Before concluding that another layer of town government is a good idea, it makes sense to analyze the selectmen's role to determine whether the concerns are real or perceived.

Many years ago, Winsted adopted the town manager concept to manage the town and administer the policies set forth by the town meeting/board of selectmen branches of government. The town manager concept has failed in Winsted because selectmen do not understand their role or that of the town manager.

Richard S. Childs, the founder of the manager form of government said,

"Neither the mayoralty or commission form of government has consistently provided good government. Both have tended to produce poor executives and have furthered the spoils system. Why? Because both of these forms attempt to elect administrators to manage the city's business in denial of the sound principle: to choose qualified administrators, appoint; to find representative policy-makers, elect. This supports the sound principle that there could and should be a separation of politics and administration."

The role of the Board of Selectmen is to establish policy. For example, at budget time the selectmen should contemplate the goals and objectives they want to attain in the coming year. The result of this process should be a budget increase or decrease to further these goals.

It is then the responsibility of the town manager to implement the policy. The manager must prepare the budget with the goals in mind, directing the department heads to submit budgets that comply with the goals. If the budget presented by the manager does not meet the objectives of the selectmen, then the manager has failed.

But instead of focusing on its policy-making role, the Board of Selectmen attempts to administer and manage. Just look at the budget process. The manager and the department heads essentially submit a "wish list," usually out of line with Winsted's revenue. Then selectmen attempt to modify, reduce or slash department budgets they know almost nothing about. This process takes the responsibility off of the town manager and department heads to comply with the financial policy directives of the selectmen and sends a signal that the town manager and department heads don't have to do their jobs.

It also makes the selectmen look ridiculous and incompetent. It's frustrating to watch selectmen scratching away at budget line items instead of directing the manager and department heads to do the job. Selectmen doing the work of the manager and the department heads is a bad habit developed in recent years. Every selectman in the past eight years has engaged in this practice. It shows in the budgets presented to the Town Meeting.

The remedy is to repair the current system, not add another layer of bureaucracy. The Town Meeting/Board of Selectmen must set policy. Management and administration of policy is the job of the town manager, department heads and our award-winning finance department (which would comply with policy directives if there were any). Another elected board will not correct the failure of the selectmen and the manager to do their jobs. It will muddy the waters further, complicate the process unnecessarily and make accountability further removed from the people.

Question 2: *Shall the Charter be amended to combine the Water Pollution Control Authority and the Winsted Water Division into a joint water/sewer commission?*

Much of the same argument for rejecting a board of finance applies here. Charter Revision Commission members think that the Board of Selectmen is overworked by having to deal with the water issues of the town.

But again, voters should examine the selectmen's role to determine whether the concerns are real or perceived. The two primary areas of focus for the Board of Selectmen should be the finances of the town and the water issues. We have administrators and commissions already established to handle every other matter in town. From a board of education, to a civil service commission, to a town manager, a purchasing agent, public works department... you name it, Winsted has a body to deal with it. Are selectmen trying to do themselves out of a job?

The water board is an elected body, accountable to the people. When the people do not support the decisions made by the water board, it can elect different representatives. The sewer commission is an appointed body with little public accountability, as would be the proposed water/sewer commission.

The town manager and the board of selectmen should be examining ways to make the process more effective, not simply unloading responsibilities into new appointed entities that are farther removed from the people.▼