Winsted charter revision on hold for now

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WINSTED — Residents soundly rejected the recommendations of the last Charter Revision Commission on Election Day, but many selectmen said this week they may push to call for another.

A bitter struggle over the firing of suspended Town Manager Wayne W. Dove has selectmen carefully watching how the charter is interpreted. A hearing is scheduled for Dec. 18 in Litchfield Superior Court over whether Dove's firing can be brought to referendum.

The case filed by Charlene LaVoie, community lawyer, seeks a referendum on the issue of his employment.

"Maybe when the dust settles on all of this we can start a commission," Selectman Brian W. Sullivan said last night. "But right now I'm not so sure it's a good idea."

But for many selectmen, calling a new commission will depend on how the dust settles, not when.

Mayor William H. McCabe is in favor of waiting. However, he said he would move quickly to start a charter commission if LaVoie succeeds in bringing the Dove firing to a referendum.

Selectman Nancy P. Habbal agrees.

"I think that if the judge rules that there should be a referendum that the Board of Selectmen should very quickly convene another charter commission," she said.

Habbal said she believes a decision allowing a referendum would jeopardize the way Winsted now runs its government by making the town manager's employment an issue for citizens to decide. Until now, the board of selectmen's authority to fire a town manager has never been questioned.

However, Selectman John F. Gauger Jr., said yesterday the only need he sees for a Charter Revision Commission would be if the court rules against LaVoie's complaint.

Gauger believes that the charter in its present form adequately allows for community involvement in the political process.

"We have an open structure," he said. "What I don't like about the process is that people have made it political."

But one veteran of three Charter Revision Commissions warned against starting a charter commission in the political atmosphere in Winsted right now.

"I don't want see a reactionary committee," said Beverly Nalette, a member of charter commissions in 1983, 1987 and 1991.

Nalette said she believes that at least a six-month cooling off period is essential. Without it, the document may be perceived as having a political bent.

Two charter questions prepared by a Charter Revision Commission that worked for more than a year were defeated as questions in the November election.

A question to form a separate water commission to set the water rates in town was defeated by a vote of 1,267 to 668.

A second question covering all other changes, including a change that would have made the Board of Selectmen a town council, was defeated 1,449 to 996.

The charter was last amended in 1967.

No records of early meetings

WINSTED — In 1960, the Charter Revision Commission kept almost no records of its proceedings.

The town clerk's records in town hall show almost no minutes recording the intentions of the commission members who first outlined the town manager form of government in Winsted.

A complaint has been filed by Charlene LaVoie, community lawyer, requesting that a referendum be held on the recent suspension and vote of intent to fire Town Manager Wayne W. Dove.

Mark J. Svonkin, town attorney, said in the absence of records on the intent of the original commission he wants to put William T. Riiska, town clerk, on the stand to testify as an expert witness Dec. 18 at 11:30 a.m. in Litchfield Superior Court.

In addition, Svonkin hopes to use former town attorney and Charter Commission Chairman Judith Dixon, as well as former town attorney Stephen O. Allaire to shed light on what he believes is the charter's intention to separate the rights of the people at a town meeting from the Board of Selectmen's authority to handle a personnel issue.

LaVoie objected to the use of expert witnesses in court with Judge Anne C. Dranginis appearing to agree with LaVoie's concerns.

Svonkin said yesterday his case would not be hindered if the judge did not weigh heavily the testimony of expert witnesses.