

To: Plymouth Charter Commissioners  
From: Michael Hanlon, Town Meeting Member, Precinct 15  
Date: June 20, 2021

I will be out-of-town next week, and am not sure that I will be back in Plymouth in time to attend the Charter Commission meeting on Thursday night. Therefore, I am providing you with my written comments in case I am not able to attend the meeting. I have been a Town Meeting Member for six years, and was recently re-elected to another three year term. Prior to that I served on the Advisory & Finance Committee for six years. My comments are in three areas. First, regarding the results of the election. Second, the problems that I see with the current representative town meeting form of government. And third, the issues that I think are important for you to consider during your deliberations.

As you know well the Plymouth Charter Transition Committee worked for two years to obtain over 7200 certified signatures on our citizen's petition. That successful effort resulted in the charter commission ballot question that passed by an overwhelming margin on May 15th. While the voter turnout was disappointing, the 4,962 voters that did cast a ballot voted 3,878 (78%) in favor, and 1,084 (22%) opposed. This almost 4 to 1 margin of victory should provide ample evidence to the Charter Commissioners that the citizens of Plymouth are in favor of change. Many of the Charter Commissioners indicated during the election campaign that they were in favor of keeping the town meeting form of government. Some indicated their willingness to keep an open mind, and to consider other alternatives. It would be a huge disservice to the citizens of Plymouth for this Charter Commission to disregard the will of the voters by not considering other options for our form of government. You have a mandate from the voters. It will be long time before we have another opportunity like this one. Please take advantage of it.

The problems that I see with our current form of government are many. Some have said that it is "the most democratic form of government". I do not believe this because all the available forms of government are "representative", meaning they are chosen by the voters and are thus "democratic" by definition. To say that one is more democratic than another is to deny the value of other forms that are perfectly valid, and have been successfully adopted in many other communities. Some have suggested that the town council and city council forms of government are "corrupt". This is far from the truth. Corruption can exist in any form of government not because of the "form" of that government, but because of the people that get elected to serve in that government. Most elected officials are intent on serving the people as best they can, while others are intent on serving themselves. That is no more nor less than human nature. In no way is this a reflection on the "form of government".

I also want to point out two problems with our election cycles because we have our annual election in the spring. In this past election cycle a meager 11.9% percent of the registered voters actually bothered to vote. Was that because they do not care about the Town of Plymouth? Was that because they do not care about how their tax dollars are spent? I think not. In my opinion it is because they lack adequate information on which to base a voting decision. The state and national news media give us plenty of opportunity to learn about state, national, and

international events, but give us no opportunity to learn about local (Plymouth) events. Sadly, our local (TV, radio, and newsprint) news outlets are insufficient to inform the voters about important events in Plymouth. Other forms of government have their elections in the fall when there is a much greater likelihood of a high voter turnout, especially if the local election is piggy-backed on the state and federal elections. This needs to be considered.

Secondly, by our current charter three out of the nine Town Meeting Members in each precinct are up for election/re-election every year. In the last election cycle seven out of the fifteen voting precincts did not have a full slate of candidates to fill the Town Meeting seats. There were fifteen Town Meeting seats for which there was no candidates. In this situation write-in candidates get elected with as little as "one vote". Is this the form of government that we want that cannot field a sufficient number of candidates to serve in public office? This should be unacceptable to all of you.

Another problem that I want to mention is that Town Meeting meets only twice per year. The last Charter Review Committee recommended that Town Meeting meet three times per year, but this was rejected by a majority of Town Meeting Members. I think this is a problem in a growing community of 65,000 people with an annual operating budget of \$275 million. A town council or city council form of government would meet more often, as frequently as ever week or every other week. This is an important issue that needs to be considered. The governmental business of the Town of Plymouth will become more and more complex as the town continues to grow in the future. The time is now to give full consideration to a more effective, efficient, and flexible form of government like a town council or city council. I hope that you will invite elected officials from other communities that have had the courage to make a change in their form of government to determine how it has worked for them. We do not need to reinvent the wheel, but should take the opportunity to learn from the experience of other communities. What do they like about their new form of government? What do they dislike? Is the new form better or worse than the previous form? These are all questions that you could ask them.

Lastly, I want to mention the issue of "accountability". As Town Meeting Members we are exempt from the Conflict of Interest Statute. But, our town charter, which has been approved by the Attorney General, has our own unique conflict of interest language. This clause in our town charter has the full force of the law. But, some Town Meeting Members continue to argue that it is not valid, and continue to ignore it when they vote in their own self-interest, and defy their oath of office. Is this acceptable to you? This would not even be an issue if we had a town council or city council form of government, because they are not exempt from the Conflict of Interest Statute. I hope that you would agree that all elected officials should be accountable to the voters for their performance and their behavior.

In summary, there is no perfect form of government. All forms have their advantages and disadvantages, their pros and cons. It is critically important that you investigate all options with an open mind. Open to the possibilities of success, not of failure. I wish you all success in your deliberations on our form of government. The future of Plymouth is in your hands.