

Charter Review Committee
Public Forum on Municipal Election Issues
Tuesday, April 30, 2019, 7:00 p.m.
JFK Middle School Community Room
100 Bridge Road, Florence, MA 01062

Minutes of the Public Forum

Chair Moulton opened the meeting at 7 p.m. and welcomed the audience to the public forum. He gave a brief background of the Charter Review Committee and its responsibilities of issuing a report to the City Council and the Mayor by the end of the year.

- **Presentations**

City Clerk Pam Powers was present, with two members of the Board of Registrars, to speak about “no-excuse” voting. See attached testimony.

Margot Schocket-Greene, co-chair, Tucker Quinlan, co-chair, Noah Kassis and Willa Sippel, all of the Mayor’s Youth Commission, were present to advocate for lowering the voting age in Northampton to 16 years old.

Margot Shocket-Greene stated that lowering the municipal voting age will increase voter turnout and participation and increase civic engagement from all ages. She furthered that the youth, specifically in Northampton, have proven they are able to speak and think rationally. They have organized walk outs and protests, led the March for Our Lives and the High School Democrats have organized Town Hall meetings with state and local representatives. They would like to be represented in the municipal decisions that affect them. The youth of Northampton have gained a lot of knowledge of how voting works and if the voting process starts at a young age then by the age of 18 they will be familiar with the process. She furthered by saying, “as people say, once you start voting, you don’t stop”. In Massachusetts schools, there is a civic education requirement which teaches students how voting impacts society and gets students fully engaged. At the age of 16, youths are given responsibilities such as driving a car, consenting to sex and being prosecuted as adults in criminal courts so with these responsibilities, they believe they should have the right to be heard and vote on decisions that impact them.

Tucker Quinlan stated that the biggest portion of the municipal budget is the school budget and most individuals who live and work in Northampton did not go through the Northampton Public School system but the 16-year-olds living in the city are currently in the school system and have been for a while. There has been success in lowering the voting age in different countries. Austria, in particular, lowered the voting age and found that younger voters were no less informed than their older counterparts in any election.

Noah Kassis stated there are a few cities that have lowered the voting age to 16 and a common argument against is that 16-year-olds will be influenced by their parents and/or aren’t mature

enough to form their own opinions. From experience and being surrounded by 16-year-olds all day, he doesn't find that to be the case. A great example of this is that May 1st, the students at Northampton High School have organized a stand-out before school in solidarity with their teachers during the ongoing salary negotiations. He sees people who he thought were not interested in this topic getting involved. 16-year-olds, especially in Northampton, are unique and have a great grasp on the issues that are facing the community and schools. Mr. Kassis stated that he sees and knows 16-year-olds who are more informed than adults and they should be given the right to say who is leading the community and what decisions are being made.

Willa Sippel stated she is one of the leaders of the Sunrise Movement in Northampton which is a new movement in support of the Green New Deal. This is the first youth climate movement being led entirely by young people and a huge amount of people from the high school are showing up to support and advocate for their futures. Being able to speak to their experience by voting is crucial in fulfilling the representation they hunger for.

Bob Boulrice stated that the average turnout of adult voters in Northampton is 38%. He asked the members of the Youth Commission how many of their colleagues would vote if given the chance.

Ms. Shocket-Greene stated that during bake sales and other events, the Youth Commission always has a stack of pre-registration forms and students come to the bake sale not for the brownies, but for the pre-registration forms. She stated that everyone in the high school who is not 18 is pre-registered and excited to vote and eager to have their voices heard. As far as percentages, she believes there would definitely be more than 38% of her peers who would jump at the chance to vote.

Bob Boulrice stated that the Youth Commission is essentially asking for representation without taxation.

Mr. Quinlan stated that is not necessarily true because all of his peers that have jobs, pay taxes on their wages.

Ms. Shocket-Greene furthered by saying that students are out in Northampton all the time buying things and paying taxes, buying food and paying taxes, holding a job and paying taxes and contributing to Northampton's economy. She stated that is not a qualification for voting in this country – only citizenship and age is.

Bob Boulrice asked out of all of their peers, how many of them are adequately informed.

Ms. Shocket-Greene stated 100% of them are.

Mr. Kassis stated that the percentage would definitely be no less than that of adults. He furthered by saying that if the voting age was lowered to 16, his peers would get out and vote simply for the purpose that the Northampton community trusts their youth.

Robbie Sullivan asked if their exposure to civics in middle and high school played a factor in advocating for lowering the voting age and at what age they recall having an interest or starting to understand how our government works.

Mr. Quinlan stated that for him it started in middle school during his first history class learning how the country was formed and it made him interested in how the city and the country runs and why he doesn't get a say in it. When he got to the high school, he got involved in the Youth Commission immediately.

Ms. Shocket-Greene stated that she came from a small school and when she entered Northampton High School, she wasn't sure how to make her voice heard. She knew she needed to do something in a big community where she couldn't vote and most of the adults she spoke to weren't interested in hearing her political opinion, so she joined the Youth Commission and was struck by the impact her voice can make.

Howard Fain, Deputy Director of Policy and Research for Voter Choice Massachusetts, was present to provide a presentation in support of ranked choice voting. See attached presentation and testimony.

- **Public Comment**

Liz Popolo of Voter Choice Massachusetts spoke in support of ranked choice voting. She stated that voters prefer ranked choice voting because it is easy and intuitive. There is a vast majority of voters who make no errors, the turnout rate is boosted and language translation is available. She furthered that voters see more candidate they like and are more excited to get out and vote.

Rachael Naismith of Florence and a member of Indivisible Northampton spoke in support of ranked choice voting. She stated that ranking candidates ensures voters are voting for the candidates they want and helps voters who are torn between candidates. Ranked choice voting allows people to vote with their heart instead of strategizing on how they will vote.

Karen Foster of Northampton believes the most important thing is to work towards bringing more people into the voting process. She spends a lot of time with marginalized populations and anything that can be done to bring more people into the process is important. The Charter Review Committee has an opportunity to make a progressive choice to move away from what has always been done and choose something that is best for Northampton. Hopefully that will have a ripple effect into other communities.

Doreen Weinberger of Florence spoke as a strong supporter of ranked choice voting. She stated that in the last election there was a ballot initiative in which ranked choice voting received over 70% of votes in every municipality that had it on the ballot.

Helen Armstrong of Lathrop Community was very impressed with the youths who spoke and made a very cogent set of arguments for voting at 16. She stated that the climate crisis is going to land on the younger generation's lap especially hard, so they deserve to be listened to and heard. They are articulate and aware of what is at stake for them and their future.

Claire Hutlinger of Florence was present to speak to ranked choice voting. For the past year and a half she has been working with Voter Choice Massachusetts standing at farmers markets and parades and for the most part people aren't informed but when they are informed, there is overwhelming support.

Jack Hjelt of Lathrop Community is a relative newcomer to Northampton and thinks the committee shouldn't lose sight of a moment like this evening and hopes the committee will continue to plow new ground.

Harriet Charland of Florence asked the committee to listen to the students because they are very smart. She stated that ranked choice voting will not change the outcome of who will win because the candidates with the most votes will win.

Claudia Lefko stated that one of the issues in Northampton is a lack of candidates looking to run for office. She raised the question of term limits because there is usually no contest with long term incumbents. She furthered that after a while, people don't want to jump into the race because the incumbent knows more. She stated that there is a need for turnover for new people to have a chance and share ideas.

Diana Riddle of Florence spoke in support of ranked choice voting and how it impacts the outcome of elections. She stated that if there is a first and second choice and the first choice doesn't have the majority then those votes go towards the second choice which will affect the outcome.

Brigid Glackin of Florence spoke in favor of ranked choice voting but also urged the committee to look at other ideas from other states. There are other models to look at that will get people out to vote and have people feel like their vote counts such as independent redistricting and top-two primaries.

Patty Healey asked what kind of investment there is in education of voters regarding ranked choice voting.

Mr. Fain stated that there was a thorough public education campaign in Maine which was led by the League of Women Voters in partnership with the state. When ranked choice voting passes in cities, etc., public education is automatically built in. The Maine Secretary of State was anxious about ranked choice voting but in the end it worked out like "a dream", and came in 10% under budget.

Ms. Popolo stated that the Massachusetts Secretary of State has come out in support of ranked choice voting and has publicly said it is something that needs to be adopted. This is a boost to the kinds of resources that can now be allocated for public education. She stated that Voter Choice Massachusetts has done public demonstrations and invited people to sample four different kinds of pie or donuts and by using a sample ballot, people rank their choices. This has been very successful and people who didn't want to participate came away saying it was not as bad as they thought.

Bob Boulrice stated that Easthampton, which uses the same software as Northampton, has noted that there are software costs included with ranked choice voting and asked why Mr. Fain stated that he didn't see any technology issues or additional expenditures.

Mr. Fain stated that there is a software upgrade package which offers a complete ranked choice voting suite including the ballots, tabulation, scanning and results reporting.

Robbie Sullivan asked if there are any unintended consequences of ranked choice voting or typical arguments against it.

Mr. Fain stated that the most common question is whether the system can be "gamed" or not. It cannot. Ranked choice voting brings out more candidates but instead of it being a problem, it can handle all the candidates and there is no risk of vote splitting, no risk of strategizing and with more voices there are more choices.

Robbie Sullivan asked if there has been talk of a cap on candidates.

Mr. Fain stated there hasn't been because there shouldn't be. With a massive field of candidates, the choices will only boost one of the candidates.

Andy Anderson of Voter Choice Massachusetts stated that one of the common arguments is voter fatigue because there are too many candidates to look through. The important point is if there is a group of candidates you are interested in, then you can rank those and the vote will go to coalesce into a number of electable candidates instead of splitting the vote. A way to get around limiting or capping candidates is to require more signatures on the petitions to ensure that the candidates have a lot of support. Another argument is that ranked choice voting requires a candidate to have core support and broad support and people will say that everyone's second choice can't win, which is true because if they are the second choice they will not be anyone's first choice.

Chair Moulton concluded the public forum by thanking the presenters and the speakers. The Charter Review Committee is discussing all issues relating to the charter, not just election issues, and invites anyone who would like to speak to the committee to attend a meeting. Meetings are held the first and third Tuesday of every month at 6:30 p.m. in the City Hall Hearing Room.