

BLUE RIBBON ADVISORY COMMITTEE MEETING
Wednesday, June 27, 2018
5:30 P.M.

Committee Members Present: Drozdowski (via phone), Schwarz, Hanner, Champlin, McIlroy, Antaya, Helmboldt, Burleson, Burton, Whitfield, Tomak, Moreno, Godfrey, Weaver, Settles and Fukuyama (arrived 5:37 pm)

Committee Members Absent : Johnson and Squires

Others Present: Jill Steele, City Attorney: Rebecca Fleury, City Manager: Victoria Houser, City Clerk

Call to Order: Dr. Schwarz called the meeting to order at 5:32 p.m.

Public Comment: John Harper, Ward 3 resident, commented on the city charter adopted in 1963, stating amendments to the charter should only be considered when City circumstance deem necessary, providing an example when the City and Townships of Battle Creek merged, not just due to popular opinion. Mr. Harper expressed his concern the committee's duty was to consider if there was a compelling reason to change the ordinance, not just because of popular opinion, asking the committee to be responsible, and to use their expertise and wisdom before recommending change.

Approval of Minutes: Mr. Godfrey, supported by Ms. Antaya, made a motion to approve the May 16, 2018 meeting minutes. All yes, none opposed. Motion approved.

Prior Meeting Business

Dr. Schwarz reviewed the committee's prior meeting discussions, including direct election of the mayor and vice mayor, the number of elected officials, term of officials, staggered terms, size of the commission, whether the commission should be made up of multiple wards or a single ward (all at-large), or a combination. Dr. Schwarz also noted the committee unanimously supported a change to gender-neutral language.

Mr. Godfrey asked the City Manager if the committee report was accepted with comment or not.

Ms. Fleury noted the report was accepted without comment.

Mr. Steele informed the committee that the Mayor thought a commission workshop should be called to discuss the report. Ms. Steele noted the committee appointments are until January 2019.

Survey Update:

Ms. Fleury provided information related to the survey, noting approximately 90% of the respondents report being city residents. Ms. Fleury also noted a majority, 52%, supported the direct election of the mayor and vice mayor as separate ballot items, a majority expressing a preference to keep the number of elected officials at 9. Ms. Fleury noted there were mixed feelings about the number of at-large and ward commissioners. Ms. Fleury shared that the question of staggered terms was almost a split of 50/50, with staggering winning out by a small amount. Lastly, Ms. Fleury stated there was a preference of two-year terms, with 57% of respondents.

Recommended Charter Amendments (to date) :

Dr. Schwarz requested committee member provide final comment on the survey results and the final recommendations of the committee.

1. Direct Election of Mayor and Vice Mayor

Mr. Champlin, referring to the survey, stated the comments indicate no change is necessary, agreeing with Mr. Harper that there is no compulsion to make a change, stating it would just be ceremonial.

McIlroy expressed agreement with Mr. Champlin, stating residents elect the commissioner as a whole, therefore expressing their confidence in their ability to lead as mayor.

Mr. Whitfield also agreed, stating that after reviewing the survey results and listening to residents' comment, he expressed a preference that the charter remain as it currently is.

Ms. Steele noted there was not a requirement to open the charter based upon the items being considered by this committee because any of them may be changed by amendment after being put to a vote of the public. Ms. Steele also noted only 30% of survey respondents wanted to continue with the commissioners selecting the mayor, while 52% preferred a separate ballot question for mayor and vice mayor, with 17% preferring the mayor being determined based upon the top vote-getter selected by citizens.

Mr. Burton reminded members the committee was responsible for making suggestions, stating their suggestions were not final, simply a recommendation. Mr. Burton confirmed the survey results would be shared with the commission, leaving them to make the final determination. Mr. Burton noted the committee's discussions and recommendations align with the survey results.

Dr. Schwarz recommended the report to the commission inform them that lively conversations occurred, that the survey results were reviewed, suggesting the commission consider the direct election of the mayor and vice mayor, recommending the commission consider the positives and negatives of a direct election.

Mr. Helmboldt, addressing Mr. Harper's comments, stated the community has learned a lot over the last 50 years, stating they have a clearer understanding of the current system of electing officials, and what that system had given and what it has not. Mr. Helmboldt further stated the nation, and the community, has a better understanding what living in diverse communities means, awareness of racist foundations and the impacts on everyone. Mr. Helmboldt requested the committee consider, instead of the direct election of both the mayor and vice mayor, the mayor and vice mayor positions be the two highest vote recipients of the at-large candidates. Mr. Helmboldt stating this would better promote inclusion, stating that if separate votes were on the ballot it would magnify the potential for the dominant population to win. Mr. Helmboldt further explained that one item on the ballot, with the two top vote recipients appointed to mayor and vice mayor may provide a better chance for the subordinate group to have a better chance of coming in second, thus being included on the commission body.

Ms. Antaya expressed agreement with Mr. Helmboldt. Ms. Antaya, responding to Mr. Harper, stated voters have become more aware in the last several years, stating voters know a lot more about hidden forces that impact politics and our community, such as systemic racism. Ms. Antaya also commented on potential animosity issues among commissioners with the current manner of nominating the mayor and vice mayor, also stating the mayor's responsibility of assigning committees is an important consideration when considering how the Mayor is selected, and the public should have more input on committee assignments.

Mr. Moreno also agreed, stating the committee should make a simple recommendation for the Mayor to be selected by voters, but allow the commission to determine the details as to the method.

Mr. Godfrey expressed his opinion there is a constant part of the nation's citizens who do not believe or support government. Mr. Godfrey further stated he has heard from citizens that there is a need for more transparency, which is why the direct election of mayor and vice mayor is important. Mr. Godfrey agreed the recommendation to the commission should be the top and second vote recipient for mayor and vice mayor.

Dr. Schwarz noted there is no strong executive with the way the commission is constituted, stating they are a legislative body. Dr. Schwarz stated past mayors did an excellent job of bringing everyone together, but thinks it would be better if they were directly elected. Dr. Schwarz noted the State Senate votes for the majority leader, just as the commissioners vote for the mayor, noting each elected official's votes count the same as all others, stating this helped to steer everyone together to consider important issues. Dr. Schwarz finished by saying it was important to let the people decide.

A motion was made by Mr. Burton, supported by Mr. Moreno, that the Blue Ribbon Advisory Committee recommends to the city commission to consider direct election of the mayor and vice mayor, leaving the method of election to the commission.

Yes: Drozdowski (via phone), Schwarz, Antaya, Helmboldt, Burleson, Burton, Tomak, Moreno, Godfrey, Weaver, Settles and Fukuyama. Opposed: Champlin, Hanner, Whitfield, and McIlroy. Motion approved.

2. Length of term: 2 or 4 years

Mr. Moreno expressed his belief a 2-year commission term works best, stating terms are determined if the candidates are re-elected by the voter, showing their satisfaction.

Mr. Champlin noted 2-year terms eliminates the need to stagger terms.

Mr. Burton, supported by Ms. Tomak, made a motion that the Blue Ribbon Advisory Committee recommends the terms of all elected city officials be 2 years, not staggered, including mayor or vice mayor, with elections held bi-annually. All yes, none opposed. Motion approved.

3. Size of commission

A motion was made by Mr. Godfrey, supported by Mr. Helmboldt, to recommend to the commission that the mayor and vice mayor be at-large candidates, with the remaining 7 candidates be ward commissioners, for a total of 9 commissioners.

Yes: Schwarz, Hanner, McIlroy, Antaya, Helmboldt, Burleson, Burton, Whitfield, Tomak, Moreno, Godfrey, Weaver, Settles and Fukuyama. Opposed: Champlin and Drozdowski (via phone). Motion approved.

Dr. Schwarz noted the ward lines would be determined by the GIS department.

4. Ungendered Charter Language

A motion was made by Mr. Godfrey, supported by Ms. Settles, for the commission to consider a change to all language in the charter to be ungendered. All in favor, none opposed. Motion approved.

Dr. Schwarz asked the City Manager, the City Attorney and the City Clerk to create a report to the commission, asking that it be sent to the committee for review and comment.

Ms. Steele stated staff would send the report to committee members, and if there were no objections to accuracy, the report could be submitted to the commission, stating an additional meeting could be called if there were objections. Ms. Steele stated she took notes on comments made to demonstrate there was lively discussion and careful thought among the committee members. Ms. Steele requested that committee members review and provide a response or objections in a timely manner so that the report could be presented to the commission.

Dr. Schwarz recommended all committee members attend the commission meeting, along with the workshop, to inform the commission that the recommendations were the result of strong debate.

Committee members expressed appreciation to staff for their research and preparation for the committee, and to each other for their participation and attendance to the numerous meetings. Committee members agreed the discussions often changed their perspectives, but they treated each other with respect, noting no animosity was ever evident. Committee members stated they were excited about the recommendations, with a spirit of transparency, stating they look forward to the commission's response.

Ms. Fleury stated the earliest time to add the Blue Ribbon Advisory Committee report to the Commission agenda would be July 17, 2018, suggesting the committee reconvene only if needed to make clarifications to the report. Ms. Fleury suggested Wednesday, July 11th for a possible meeting of the Blue Ribbon Advisory Committee.

Dr. Schwarz thanked all members for taking their responsibility to the committee seriously.

Next Meeting: Wednesday, July 11, 2018 at DPW Multi-purpose Room, at 5:30 pm, if needed.

Adjournment: The meeting was adjourned at 6:39 p.m.