

Charter Board

09-28-23 18:00

6) Public Comments

Agenda Item: eComments for 6) Public Comments

Jim Crawford

Location:

Submitted At: 1:06pm 09-26-23

I serve on the Charter Board as one of three Alternate members, meaning we are required to attend all meetings and can replace any member who drops out during the course of our 12 month Board's assignment. All Board meetings are open to the public and live on-line as well as recorded and available on the County website.

At the September 14 meeting, the voting Board members voted 7-2 to deny us Alternates the ability to participate in any discussions or offer questions to invited guest speakers. Their action was taken in spite of the County Attorney stating that other County-appointed Committees, do in fact, allow participation by alternates, and such is consistent with Robert's Rules. It was suggested that we can act as any citizen and anything we have to offer can be submitted as comments in writing. Very well then.

I would offer some pertinent facts.

As a brief review, there are three types of County governments in Maryland: Commissioner, Code Home Rule, and Charter Home Rule. Charles County was Commissioner until 2000 when we elected to change to Code Home Rule, which meant we still had Commissioners, but they had more authority in running the County without the necessity of approval by the State Legislature. I also served on that "Form of Government Committee," for which we unanimously recommended the public vote to approve Code, and they did.

In 2014 the County attempted to change to Charter, but the public soundly REJECTED that proposal. Why? Because that proposed Charter failed to adequately address key issues that the public wanted in any such charter.

Now In 2023, the Commissioners, by a 3-2 vote, approved and later appointed a 9-member and 3-alternate member Charter Board to once again write a Charter and offer it for public voting at the 2024 Election. The Board began in June and was charged with producing a Charter by June 2024, in time for the Election.

If this 2024 proposed Charter is to pass by the voting public, it must adequately address the issues which caused the 2014 failure.

The 2024 Charter must include 10 key Points:

1. Incorporate appropriate limits of the power of the County Executive, especially denying the power to appoint a county police force separate from the duly elected County Sheriff, or appoint a county fire chief over all of the local volunteer squads.
2. Establish term limits and qualifications for all elected offices.
3. Define a clear and simple method for a public referendum on unpopular actions.
4. Maintain the current four voting districts with council members elected by district.
5. Elect a County Council designed for truly adequate accessibility and input by the public including:
 - a. Part-time council members with limited shared full-time staff.
 - b. The School Board receives nearly 50% of the county budget, and as such its operating model should be the model for the county council.
 - c. Consist of nine members: two elected from each district and one at-large. The chair to be elected annually by the council members (same procedure as the School Board).
 - d. Elected members are Non-partisan, same as for the School Board.
 - e. Four year terms with a limit of 2 terms.
 - f. Meetings to follow "Robert's Rules of Order" with frequency defined in the Charter.
 - g. Super majority defined as requiring 6 votes for over-riding county executive veto, county executive appointments and removals.

6. Establish transition procedures and timing for implementing the offices.
7. Salaries and benefits, including perks for the elected officials.
8. Define a periodic charter review committee to make suggestions and amendments.
9. Clearly define authority and responsibilities of executive and council.
10. Determine procedure for filling vacancy of county executive and council members.

I will continue to offer suggestions to the Board regarding its progress and/or lack of progress for the benefit of the public.

Starting in June, the Board had an organizational meeting and 7 in-person working sessions, most with invited guests who had experience with the pros and cons of each type of county government.

The Board chairman, Mr. Waring, appointed several subcommittees charged with bringing a specific section of the charter to the Board for approval or modification.

The 7-2 vote against Alternates participating may be construed by many as evidence that this Board is partisan and unwilling to allow equity and inclusion.

Many of the public are already believing a Charter government will not only increase the budget (meaning higher taxes) but also alter the political structure in the county to give citizens less input.

While this may not be the case, we know "perception is reality." The Board must work to change that perception by writing a charter that includes the above 10 Points.

Respectfully submitted,
Jim Crawford