

South Burlington City Charter Committee

Excerpts from Recommendations to the City Council, September 18, 2023

The Committee's full report is available here:

<https://cms6.revize.com/revize/southburlington/Committees/Charter%20Committee/2023.9.14%20Charter%20Committee%20FINAL%20REPORT%20ALL.pdf>

City Council's Direction to the Charter Committee

As part of the South Burlington City Council's Fiscal Year 2022 Policy Priorities and Strategies, the Council identified consideration of "charter changes related to governance" as a priority. The Council passed a resolution on February 22, 2022, convening the Charter Committee to consider updates to the City's municipal charter. The resolution stated that the Council wanted "to explore governance structures to ensure that voices are equitably represented at policy making tables." It also sought to be sure the South Burlington School Board was represented in the governance discussions. The Council then requested that the School Board appoint two of its members to the Charter Committee.

The Council charged the Charter Committee with considering governance models and language updates to the city charter. It directed the committee to "engage in a community feedback process" to "solicit feedback from South Burlington residents on governance models." The Council asked that the committee finish its work by July 2023.

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Charter Committee Process

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- **Community outreach – survey, forums, other meetings**

The Committee engaged in community outreach to determine the views of South Burlington citizens on the governance structures we were considering. It deliberated on the questions we were trying to answer and developed a community survey that allowed votes for the different options as well as the opportunity to provide open-ended responses. City Manager Jessie Baker developed a document with a message from the Charter Committee, the Committee's list of pros and cons, and a link to the survey. See https://www.southburlingtonvt.gov/government/city_committees_boards/2023_city_charter_community_feedback.php. The survey was publicized in the online City News newsletter, three editions of the Other Paper, and Front Porch Forum emails. Fliers were posted at City Hall to encourage people to take the survey. The South Burlington Business Association advertised our desire for feedback and our survey at one of their membership meetings. Jessie Baker collated the community survey results, which were posted on the above website.

The committee held two community forums, Wednesday, May 10 and Thursday, May 25, from 7-9 p.m. in the City Hall auditorium. The forums were recorded and the videos appear on

the website given above. Committee members also spoke with parents at PTO meetings and with members at a Rotary meeting. At each of the meetings, the committee chair encouraged attendees to share the survey and their own thoughts on the governance structures with their neighbors after the meeting.

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Review of public input and feedback

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- **Survey**

There were 175 responses to the Charter Committee survey. Ninety-eight percent of the respondents were South Burlington residents from a variety of districts though not in equal numbers (24% from CHI-8, 17% from CHI-9, 14% from CHI-10, 16% from CHI-11, 27% from CHI-12). Eighteen percent of respondents said they had attended a community meeting on the charter issues. Eighty-five percent said they had reviewed the Committee’s spreadsheet of pros and cons. Seventy-seven percent of respondents did not have children in the city’s schools. (Note: the survey was not designed or intended to be a statistically valid survey.)

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For School Board, 60% favored the current number of School Board Directors and 40% preferred increasing that number. For those wanting to increase the number, many comments suggested 7 School Board members, while a few mentioned 10. Regarding voting districts for School Board, 52% favored voting for School Board Directors at large, 24% preferred election by legislative districts, and 24% preferred a combination of at large and districts.

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Recommendations of the Charter Committee

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- **School Board**

With a unanimous vote, the Committee recommends an increase in the number of School Board Directors. At their August 2, 2023 meeting, all current School Board Directors spoke in favor of expanding the Board. The Committee had also heard from past School Board Directors in favor of an increase. While 60% of survey respondents favored the current number of School Board Directors, only a quarter of total respondents had children in the South Burlington schools. The School Board works in committees that, among other responsibilities, negotiate with teachers, administrators, and staff, and five people is not enough to do that work without it being a substantial burden. The addition of more Directors could increase engagement and involve diverse perspectives, and allow more Directors to have discussions without violating the open

meeting laws. The Committee does not recommend a particular number of Directors, though 6 to 8 were most frequently mentioned in the survey and forums.

With a unanimous vote, the Committee recommends that South Burlington continue electing School Board Directors at large. At their August 2, 2023 meeting, all current School Board Directors spoke in favor of having at-large elections for the Board. In the survey, 52% favored voting for School Board Directors at large, 24% preferred election by legislative districts, and 24% preferred a combination of at large and districts. The Committee takes this to mean that 52% favored the current system and 48% favored an option other than the current system. Directors all represent a single school district with a state-mandated curriculum and most school issues are not localized.

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