City of Cleveland Heights

Charter Review Commission

Questions for Members of Council, City Manager, Department Directors and Chairs of Boards and Commissions

The Commission has been specifically directed by City Council to look at some critical parts of the City Charter, such as the form of government. However, as part of that effort, the Commission wants to be sure to deal with any provision that needs attention. To help ascertain views of the form of government as well as what provisions need attention, the Commission is sending out this brief survey. The questions are open ended, so you can fully express your views. You may also suggest specific changes to any provision.
In addition, the Commission may invite some respondents to attend a meeting of the Commission to further explain their views.

If you have any questions on the survey, you can contact Dr. Larry Keller, Commission Facilitator, at 216-496-4184. Please return completed surveys either by E-Mail to Dr. Larry Keller at lkeller@clvhts.com, or by envelope to Susanna O'Neil, Assistant City Manager, snoneil@clvhts.com. If desired, department heads and chairs of boards and commissions can return surveys without any identity.

Please return completed surveys by Monday, 15 January.

1. What parts of the Charter should be considered by the Commission, without necessarily implying that you believe a change should or should not be made.

   The three (3) most important elements for consideration, not necessarily in order of importance to you.

   Any remaining elements, preferably in order of importance to you.

   1. Whether our current form of government is broken and no longer serving the City and its residents well. Thus, I believe that the Commission should look at other forms of government, including strong mayor models, and consider carefully and thoroughly whether a change to that form of government, along with the associated costs and disruption associated with such a change, is in the best interests of our city.
   2. Improve/modernize certain outdated language in the Charter and updating accordingly (e.g. anti-discrimination language, gender neutrality and the like).
   3. In connection with a comprehensive review of our Charter, gather and study best practices from other cities re: their charters and determine how to incorporate the same for CH, i.e, a holistic review of the Charter. Also, conduct interviews of current and former Mayors and current council members and staff (and others deemed appropriate by the Commission as part of its thorough due diligence) in order to gain a variety of perspectives on what is working reasonably well and what may need to be changed.

2. For each part identified in Question 1, explain briefly,

   (a) why the item should be considered and if you think a change may be warranted, then
   (b) what the change should be and why.

I believe that our current form of gov't (ie Council Manager) should be studied VERY THOROUGHLY AND CAREFULLY by this commission, taking whatever time it determines is necessary in order to conduct its due diligence and formulate its recommendations. Given the seriousness of the charge and the consequences for the city, and given that this is an off-cycle review and there are no emergencies, my strong preference is that the Commission take whatever time it needs to do the job right, and I sincerely hope that the commission will not be pressured by anyone to sacrifice quality for speed. . I believe that alternative forms of gov't, most notably the Strong Mayor form, should be studied VERY CAREFULLY as well.

I believe such analysis is warranted at this time and should be undertaken b/c there are some concerned citizens in our community (some of whom you've already heard from), including informed citizens for whom I have a lot of respect, who believe that our current form of government is broken and is holding us back. I want to know if it is our form of government that is truly the problem or whether it is something else. If the former, then what changes do we need to make to our Charter to improve things, for our City's overall long term benefit?

I promise that I will carefully study the report and recommendations of this commission before I reach my own conclusions on whether there should be major changes and why. Until I receive that report, however, I have not reached any conclusions re: the form of government. Again, I expect that the good work of this deeply talented Commission (in which I place a lot of faith and confidence) will, at the end of the day, influence my thinking greatly on this topic.

3. Identify any change or changes you have observed in the facts and circumstances of the city (other than personnel changes in the City Council or City Administration) in the five (5) years since the on-cycle determination by Council in 2012 that no charter review was warranted. Note the changes that warrant this off-cycle review, and how any such changes relate to what you noted in Questions 1 and 2 above.

   After she was appointed President of Council/Mayor, our prior Mayor, later joined by some other citizens, began an initiative to change our form of government to the Strong Mayor form, claiming that our current Council-Manager form of government was not effective, and was actually hurting our City. I believe that, because the Charter expressly provides a mechanism to address these concerns, the creation of the Charter Review Commission is a better approach as it assures a broad and diverse level of citizen engagement with a correspondingly broad spectrum of neutrality, objectivity and informed perspectives. That is what led to this off-cycle Charter Review Commission after the creation of such a Commission was carefully and thoughtfully analyzed by City Council and its Administrative Services Committee.

4. What parts of the current structure of the City government are: (a) serving the City well; (b) not serving the City well?

I believe that the C-M form of government encourages a lot of input and communication between the citizens and their gov't. I think that is a very good thing, and happens a lot in CH. If this form of government works well, then the political power is not concentrated in the "Strong Mayor", and I believe that to be a good thing. Consistent with that theme, I have found that there is little (virtually none) influence by special interests. I also believe that when the C-M form is properly deployed, merit-based consensus decision making, without the influence of partisan politics, usually controls.

Bottom line: I believe that our current form of government is generally working for our residents. That said, I have not been exposed to another form of government (as a City Council member), and thus do not have a good foundation for comparison from that perspective.

Also-to state the obvious—like most situations, WHO occupies the various positions, and their understanding of their respective roles and limits on their authority/power, will play a significant role in how well (or not well) a form (indeed nearly any form) of government works. For example, I think the conduct of our President is, in many respects, deplorable and is hurting our country, both domestically and on the world stage. However, I am not in favor of changing the constitution. Rather, I am in favor of changing the occupants of the White House.

As I'm sure the Commission knows, we've recently made some leadership changes on the Council side, and I will be interested to see what impact those changes have on the overall effectiveness of our government.