

**Town of Uxbridge  
Charter Review Committee  
January 18, 2021**

The fourteenth meeting of the Uxbridge Charter Review Committee, held on the Zoom platform, was called to order by Chair, Patrick Stephan at 6:42 PM, Monday, January 18, 2021.

Present were Chair, Patrick Stephan, Clerk, Ray Talke, and committee members Rob Knapik, Joann Lindenmayer, Jeffrey Lourie, Ron Parsons, and Michael Potaski. Absent were Vice-Chair, Melissa Desmarais and committee member Barry Desruisseaux. Members of the Board of Selectmen, Brian Plasko and Stephen Mandile were also in attendance.

No members of the public were present for Citizens' Forum.

The Uxbridge Charter Review Committee interviewed Brian Plasko, the current Clerk of the Board of Selectmen. Mr. Plasko is married and has four step-children. He has lived in Uxbridge for eleven years, coached Little League and Babe Ruth baseball for 23 years, and also served as an umpire. Besides serving on the Board of Selectmen, Mr. Plasko is a member of the Trustees of Soldiers Memorials. Mr. Plasko currently works as a driving instructor.

In his opening remarks, Mr. Plasko stated, "the (Uxbridge Home Rule) Charter itself is a pretty strong Charter."

Issues addressed by Mr. Plasko include:

The current Charter requires Selectmen to serve at least a year before they can vote to remove a town manager. Yet any elected official may be recalled after serving in a position for six months. Mr. Plasko believes the time period should be consistent and Selectmen should be able to vote to remove a town manager after serving six months on the Board of Selectmen.

Mr. Plasko expressed his opinion that requiring over 2000 signatures to trigger a recall is "a little bit excessive."

When asked if anything should be changed in the Charter to help ensure the town would hire an effective town manager the first time, Mr. Plasko stated, "the best thing the Board (of Selectmen) ever did was to hire an outside firm to do the search."

Although hiring a search firm might be more appropriate as a policy decision than an addition to the Charter, Mr. Plasko said it was, and would be, beneficial to the town. The search firm identified more than twice the number of qualified candidates than the previous time a town manager was hired. Mr. Plasko believes the quality of our current Town Manager, Steven Sette, is a testament to the value of using a professional search firm.

Mr. Plasko believes the town should have a human resources director. Under the current Charter, the Board of Selectmen are prohibited from intervening if an employee has an issue with the Town Manager. A human resources director could serve as an arbiter or buffer between an employee and the Town Manager if an issue or conflict should arise.

According to Mr. Plasko, a human resources director could also reach out to the community and help fill open appointed slots on town committees and boards. Mr. Plasko would like to see an annual committee and board "job fair" established to provide information about open positions and help recruit and identify qualified individuals to fill those positions. This could benefit the town by getting more people involved in town boards and committees.

When asked if establishing a Board of Assessors is desirable, Mr. Plasko stated he is always in favor of having talented individuals helping out the town. However, he did point out the town has difficulty completely filling seats on the boards and committees already in existence.

When asked if additional positions or committees should be documented in the Charter or the town Bylaws, Mr. Plasko expressed a preference for including them in the Charter.

In assessing the excessive turnover of town managers and department heads during the past decade or so, Mr. Plasko said adding a human resources director could possibly help reduce turnover by establishing a mechanism to address employee concerns. Salary was also an obvious reason for some people leaving. Although there are many different reasons for employee turnover, Mr. Plasko does not believe the form of government or the Charter contributes to, or causes, this turnover.

Mr. Plasko also said the turnover Uxbridge has seen in town managers is not unique. Many towns in the Commonwealth have experienced a revolving door of town managers.

In response to a question, Mr. Plasko stated the Town Manager should be named as the Chief Executive Officer of the town in the Charter. Mr. Plasko said he is not in favor of going back to a Town Administrator. He pointed out most members of the Board of Selectmen have full-time jobs and don't have the time or expertise to handle the day-to-day management of town affairs.

When asked if Uxbridge should consider a form of government other than the current Open Town Meeting, Mr. Plasko said he didn't think Uxbridge was ready for any other type of town government. He doesn't think Uxbridge's population would support enough involved people to successfully implement a Representative Town Meeting government.

The Uxbridge Charter Review Committee then interviewed Selectman Stephen Mandile. Mr. Mandile has lived in Uxbridge since 2008, is married and has two daughters at Taft Elementary School. Mr. Mandile is a disabled veteran and has served as an Assistant Legislative Director for the Massachusetts Disabled American Veterans. He is in recovery from an opioid addiction and has done advocacy work for cannabis

During his interview, Mr. Mandile spoke on the following issues:

Mr. Mandile likes the overall structure of government in Uxbridge, particularly the town having a town manager rather than a town administrator. He believes the town needs a dedicated, full-time professional to manage the town government. Because the members of the Board of Selectmen have other career and family responsibilities, they don't have the time to manage the day-to-day affairs of Uxbridge. The regular turnover of Board of Selectmen members makes it very difficult to have any consistency in town management, unless there is a town manager in place.

Mr. Mandile believes much of the employment turnover in town is due to inconsistency and a lack of confidence in the town's leadership. The lack of a "keystone" (long-term town manager) in town government causes high turnover.

A human resources director is something "we definitely need," according to Mr. Mandile. One benefit of having a human resource director involves "whistleblower protection." A town employee is not likely to speak up if the only avenue is through the person with whom they have a concern. A human resources director could address employment issues before they become problems which are "too big to address."

Mr. Mandile would like to have a Commission of Diversity and Inclusion. When watching town committee and board meetings, Mr. Mandile believes they are "whitewashed and male driven – that's not a representation of the population of Uxbridge."

Mr. Mandile wants to ensure that "everyone feels they have a voice and is not afraid to speak up."

He would like to see Uxbridge attract a "more diverse constituency" and believes it is important that people see other people like themselves.

Mr. Mandile is not sure if the establishment of a Commission of Diversity and Inclusion should be addressed in the Charter, the town Bylaws, or as a policy initiative. As is the case with other boards and committees in Uxbridge, there is a possibility it would be difficult to fill seats on a Commission of Diversity and Inclusion. Mr. Mandile would like the Commission of Diversity and Inclusion to start off as an advisory committee. The committee would be tasked with

reaching out to the underrepresented segments of Uxbridge and finding what they would prefer in town.

Mr. Mandile believes the role of the Board of Selectmen is to “speak for the constituents and represent the constituents.”

Mr. Mandile pointed out most members of the Board of Selectmen have no experience in running a town, so there is a need for an experienced, professional town manager.

Mr. Mandile would like to have “assistant positions” added in Uxbridge, such as an Assistant Town Manager. Individuals in these “assistant positions” would be able to get to know the town and its employees and to step into the higher role as required. Besides the advantage of seamless succession planning, these assistants can help share the workload. These positions can also provide career growth opportunities for town employees.

Mr. Mandile would like these “assistant positions” to be documented in the Charter because of the permanence inherently offered by Charters.

The conversation then addressed the time in which members of the Board of Selectmen must hold office before being permitted to vote to remove a town manager. Mr. Mandile mentioned that he was only on the Board of Selectmen for a few months when all members voted to hire a new town manager. Mr. Mandile suggested there should be a time period in which a member of the Board of Selectmen must serve before being permitted to appoint a new town manager. This would help prevent a situation in which someone might run for a Board of Selectman position solely to select a particular candidate for town manager, and then step down.

Mr. Mandile believes the functions of the Water and Sewer Commissioners, now held by the Board of Selectmen, should be moved to a separate, independent board. He supports the proposal by Benn Sherman to create a Committee (or Board) of Public Works, which would integrate the current duties of Water and Sewer Commissioners. The Committee of Public Works should be a policy-making board in the opinion of Mr. Mandile and its members should be elected by the town residents.

Mr. Plasko concurred with the opinion of Mr. Mandile and added that one-third of the town has assumed the obligation of paying for the water and sewer treatment plant. This resulted in fairly expensive water and sewer bills for these residents.

Mr. Mandile does not believe the Board of Selectmen should set water and sewer rates if the duties of Water and Sewer Commissioners are moved to an independent committee. He is confident that experts on the committee have the knowledge and expertise to establish proper rates.

Although he can see an advantage in larger municipalities, Mr. Mandile does not support electing members of the Board of Selectmen on a precinct basis. He believes there may be situations in which multiple qualified candidates may reside in one precinct, but other precincts may be bereft of any candidates. He feels the current at-large method of electing members of the Board of Selectmen is the most preferable alternative.

Mr. Mandile favors using gender neutral terms for town governing boards. In particular, the Board of Selectmen should be renamed the Select Board. Mr. Plasko concurred with this recommendation.

In Old Business, approval of the minutes from the January 4, 2021 meeting was tabled in order to allow some clarifications to be added.

Mr. Stephan began reviewing the timeline of activities of the Charter Review Committee. The Charter Review Committee needs to submit a report at the Spring Annual Town Meeting. Since the committee will probably not be suggesting any changes to the Charter at the Spring Town Meeting, there is no requirement to submit the report in advance of the meeting. The committee expects to submit its recommendations for approval at the Fall Annual Town Meeting. In support of this plan, Mr. Potaski reminded the committee the Spring Annual Town Meeting is primarily dedicated to reviewing the town budget. Rather than compete with the town budget during a long Spring Town Meeting, it would be preferable to submit any proposed articles at the Fall Town Meeting. This would permit the townspeople to more effectively assess any proposed articles.

Any proposed revisions to the Charter are first voted on locally, and then must be submitted to the Commonwealth for approval.

Mr. Stephan revealed that responses have started coming in from the survey sent to town employees and residents. He asks the members of the Charter Review Committee to complete the survey forms as well.

Mr. Talke suggested the Charter Review Committee hold several presentations to explain its findings before the Fall Town Meeting. These presentations would discuss the committee's recommendations, the submitted articles, and the rationale, benefits, and potential consequences of each recommendation.

Mr. Stephan shared a PowerPoint presentation which included some of the main topics for the committee's deliberations beginning February 1, 2021. The following topics were included in the presentation:

- Charter vs. Bylaws
- Government Structure
- Boards & Committees
- Town Manager

- Selectmen
- Water & Sewer Commissioners
- DPW Commissioners
- Police Chief
- Finance Committee
- Board of Assessors
- Town Meeting
- Town Moderator
- Nominations Committee
- Scrivener's Errors
- Quorum language
- Officer language
- Checks and Balances

Mr. Stephan would like the members of the Charter Review Committee to rank these topics.

Mr. Stephan has asked the Town Manager to provide the Charter Review Committee with an assistant to take minutes as the committee deliberates topics.

Rules of decorum and procedures of deliberations were discussed. Mr. Parsons expressed his desire for committee members to take all the time needed to fully consider and deliberate issues related to the Charter. The Charter Review Committee will address topics serially – taking the required time for each topic.

In New Business, Mr. Talke submitted a copy of the 2018 Exit Interviews (as released to the public, with significant redactions) for the record. Mr. Parsons stated the Charter Review Committee needs proper information to complete its deliberations and should have access to an unredacted copy of the Exit Interviews report. Dr. Lindenmayer suggested the committee ask the Town Counsel for an unredacted copy of the Exit Interviews report.

The next meeting of the Charter Review Committee is scheduled for Monday, February 1, 2021 at 6:30 PM.

The meeting was adjourned at 8:43 PM.

Respectfully submitted,

/s/

Raymond A. Talke, Jr.  
Clerk