

Cumberland County Charter Commission

1/8/09 Minutes

District 1: Kathleen Babeu, John Eder (via speakerphone)

District 2: Claude Morgan (interim chair), Commr. Richard Feeney, Neil Jamison

District 3: Steve Gorden, David Lunt, Lisa Villa (late)

Absent: Rep Meredith Burgess,

Staff: Elizabeth Trice, Peter Crichton

Guest: Anne Beebe-Center

Public: Pamela Cragin, Ed King, West End News

Motion to accept minutes (Feeney, Lunt), unanimous.

Guest Speaker Anne Beebe-Center from Knox County:

Background

It's exciting to see another county taking this on. There are two counties with charters: Aroostook and Knox. Knox took on some of the opportunities that charter represents and it was passed by people.

Why create a charter in Knox County? Wanted to unify departments, break down silos, create strong administrator role, create infrastructure for regional opportunities.

Strong administrator role: commissioners in many counties are part-time, and county clerks or administrators don't have authority that commissioners have. Knox County wanted to delegate HR management, purchasing, team-building to a stronger executive. Department heads often have content knowledge, but not HR or management expertise. Also, because CG is often poorly thought of poorly understood, we wanted to work with towns, schools, regional entities, to deliver and administer services on regional level in effective way.

Traditionally, a New Englander's loyalty is to towns, not to counties, and people think that if you could get rid of county gov't, more money would be available for local needs. But we know that isn't true. . . .county provides essentially quasi-state services: you'll have to pay for the services somewhere. We wanted to start to pull our county together, develop processes and procedures so we could offer services that are currently duplicated by each town. We didn't want to be the star of regionalization, just to have a seat at the table and have infrastructure to be of use in regional efforts.

Challenges

Challenge 1: each elected had different agenda: abolish county, hobble, it, expand it greatly, and everything in between. The group started looking at statutes to guide what was legal- everything should be reviewed by lawyers.

Challenge 2: How to get people of the county to care about something they don't know a lot about? County gov't is under the radar. How to also reassure them that we're not interested in taking over or competing with anything. We just want to provide a structure that can be useful in solving issues faced by municipalities.

Challenge 3: getting people to public hearings. Very few people showed up.

What's in it for the people? Give them a say over the structure and roles of county gov't. Where do you want regional gov't to go? What do you want it to look like? People can shape it as opposed to it being a creature of the legislature.

If we had charter in place, we could try to have home rule, countywide assessment, giving a service back to the state or something else which would require legislative change.

Advice

Identify opinion leaders, go out of your way to hold conversations with them, and dispel any myths.

Knox charter was voted on in November 2004, so it didn't claim a lot of people's attention. The timing worked out, but there wasn't a lot of attention. I would pull in enemies and friends and get more attention for it.

County Gov't vs different type of regional gov't

Maine towns will not have every service at every town, nor will they give it to the state.

That means having some sort of regional entity, and counties are great boundaries.

If the counties are not going to be the regional deliverer of services (and most counties just do a good job at what they're mandated to do)-, than something else should. The timing is such that we need to decide if the counties are going to be that regional form of government or not.

Counties need to see their role in the future and re-position, or realize they are going to be passed by some other structure. Cumberland County has additional regional services that other counties don't have. Change needs to come from within counties or it will be imposed.

Were municipalities supportive?

After no one came to public hearing, the county started to think about how to bring in key people. It can be what you want. You can choose to have focus groups or task forces or study groups. The Charter Commission in Knox county didn't do any work with municipalities, but County Commissioners did bring people from towns together to discuss what we can do to work together. A lot of the town people showed up. We heard a half hour of county bashing, after which we heard about the problems they have, and everyone started to realize we're all in the same boat. We started talking to the budget panels from each municipality, and that was a great avenue to galvanize the conversation and open doors.

Did you have a public relation committee?

No, perhaps they should have. The public didn't come to public hearings. Knox charter commission was miffed that people didn't come to hearings. But they weren't organized to have outreach. Each of us has our own network, socially and professionally. What could each one of us do to start conversations and create a buzz?

Was there any feedback about providing better representation to rural areas?

There are 41,000 people in Knox County. Some on the charter commission wanted to abolish county gov't so there's no way they were going to expand it. They didn't get to the point of discussing representation.

Feeney: in Cumberland County we have each commissioner representing about 80,000.

We tried to increase the number of commissioners from 3 to 7 and that was defeated. We tried to envelop the more rural communities because they were feeling disenfranchised.

Why didn't people come to hearings?

In Knox, we have high priced waterfront properties, the workforce is moving inland, and areas have very different needs. We didn't get the message out to galvanize a vision.

How to separate responsibilities of charter commission vs county gov't?

The line is where the charter commission wants it to be.

Who does your county serve? The citizen directly, or through the communities?

It's complicated. Before the charter, the county served the citizens through state purposes. It was more of a geographic convenience- citizens can go to county seat rather than to Augusta. With the charter we tried to build an infrastructure that would be attractive to municipalities: strong manager, appointed department heads, solid financial structure. The trick is to open up the box of frustration that people have and offer an opportunity. The sky is the limit. It doesn't have to be for all 16 counties, it doesn't have to be a mandate. We have this fabulous infrastructure of EMA and communications. .we have some things in place and we haven't done as much as we might. The charter repowers us to go out and have that conversation.

Do you think it's a good idea to go out to the towns?

it's an excellent idea. To have three commissioners go to a town is huge. Even to have informal meeting with people. And showing up at town meetings is huge. People didn't want to make a tape or go on cable- I think it's great to take a risk and get it out there.

How did conversation regarding abolishing county gov't go?

I only went to one hearing- charter commission took down the person's concerns rather than having conversation about their concerns. When county commrs met with town managers and elected the first half hour was bashing, then by the end they felt badly that they hadn't had these conversations before. There's a hunger out there to figure out what to do. Town managers don't like looking like they don't know what to do under budget pressures. They want people to work with to cut costs. It's not just about defending turf any more. Most towns are willing to open up in some way. With so many people needing help with heating, GA etc. ..towns would love having someone else that could meet with people face to face and help them. Times have changed. For your commission the time is ripe. So many cuts are coming down the line- what can we do on a local level?

Were you caught by legal decisions- did you ever go too far down a road that was ultimately tossed out?

Because counties are creature of legislature and what counties can and cannot do is prescribed by statute, you need to contract with a lawyer to make sure there are no conflicts. You may want to try out some ideas by a lawyer before you go too far down a road. Treasurer and Registrar of Deeds we were able to make appointed. Sheriff, Probate, and DA were more complicated. We had an administrative judge on our commission who was able to advise that it would take too long to try to change those positions.

Time frame:

We were able to get charter to voters in one year. The work of the charter commission was done by June

.
<break. Lisa Villa arrives>

Steve Gorden facilitates discussion regarding scope of commission:

Who are members of the Charter Commission?

6 elected and 3 appointed members. Want to make clear distinction as body independent from county commissioners. At our last meeting we had county commissioners sitting in on discussion. We may want to have commissioners participate either by invitation or as members of public. (With the exception of Dick Feeny, who is an officially appointed

member of the commission) We should make sure that there is a time and a place in the meetings for public input.

David Lunt: on CDBG Municipal oversight committee, we find having one commissioner having a vote is very helpful. Would like to see short periods of public input at beginning and at end.

John Eder: to be more specific about roles- I think commissioners who visit should see themselves as members of the public- not having a seat at the table , microphone etc. May compromise appearance of independence from county leadership. Commissioners should have limited influence.

Summary: We ask county commissioners to be respectful of our independence, and we will all observe an ethical wall between the two commissions.

There is as much work as we want to take on. How much can we take on?

David Lunt: each person should read 1982 proposed charter carefully. I think it's important that we hear from department heads: how hard is your job? How could it be easier or more efficient? Is there something in the charter that could make your job easier?

Gordon: our charge is to create document that gives county structure, but does not give content. We can't envision what will be needed in the future. It's up to the administrator and commission to decide whether to create for example, a public works director. Knox county charter is very simple.

Eder: we can do a lot of this work in committees.

Morgan: Knox charter was build on "bones" that could anticipate change. This should be something you do once in 100 years, not three times in 20. We should be able to copy some language from Knox charter.

Feeney: It would make sense to look at some charters outside the state of Maine. Will get copies of some.

Villa: agrees.

Public Documents:

Claude: our emails are public documents. If we are circulating additional documents of email, we should make a motion that those documents be included in the public record. For this meeting: Steve Gorden's timeline, John Eder's academic paper. (unanimous)

Nomination and election of officers.

Budget should be left with county as account to draw on, not have treasurer. (unanimous)

Group elects Claude Morgan as chair (unanimous)

Group elects Lisa Villa as co-chair (unanimous)

County will continue to provide note-taking service – no need to elect secretary.

Standing committees

Public Relations and Outreach: John Eder has ambitious intention to meet in as many towns as possible. Shouldn't waste any time in strategizing outreach. Will also do press releases working with Elizabeth Trice.

Group elects John Eder as chair of PR & Outreach (unanimous)

Don't forget Independent (Windham) and Bridgton News

Timeline:

Jan 15 hearing: Herb Adams will be there to give history of county gov't.

John will contact Herb.

Notice was published in article in Forecaster, which covers statutory requirement of public notice.

The group doesn't yet know how long to take with process. If we're going to do it in a year we're already late. If we're going to take longer we need to decide when. 2010 gubernatorial year would be good. Also gives more time for more public meetings.

Motion to anticipate and work toward a 2010 ballot question made by Neil Jamieson, seconded by Commissioner Feeney. Approved (unanimous).

Public comments:

Feeney: maybe we can get on corridor coalition meetings.

Elizabeth Trice: even if the charter doesn't address "content", you still have to decide if the county should be structured so it can be an answer to regional problems? It might be helpful to ask what the most concerning regional problems are (or problems in general that are not being sufficiently addressed by municipalities or state) or ask what county gov't can do differently.

John Eder: thinks commissioner dunk tank would bring in people.

Steve Gorden: Disagrees [with Elizabeth]. Thinks that county commissioners need to answer the content question [of what services are to be provided].

Worries that if you <AMENDMENT> [run a totally open agenda]</> completely open it up, expectations will be built which will be disappointed.

Adjourned 6pm.