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Office of the Town Clerk
Coventry, CT

UNOFFICIAL MINUTES
Town of Coventry Charter Revision Commission Meeting
January 15, 2026 6:30 PM
Town Hall Annex

1. Call To Order, Roll Call:
The Meeting was called to order by Commission Chair Mike Petro at 6:30 PM.

Members Present: Mike Petro-Chairman, Justin Murphy-Vice Chairman, Monica Gallegos-Ramirez-Secretary, John Elsesser, and Tim Liptrap (Joined at 7:10 PM-remotely).

Members Absent: Jen Beausoleil and Cheryl Resha.

Also Present: James Drumm-Town Manager, and Alex Taylor-Special Projects Coordinator.

2.Audience of Citizens: (30 Minutes - 5 Minutes maximum per citizen):
No citizens present, Audience of Citizens was closed.

3. Approval Of Minutes:
A. Minutes, December 18, 2025:
Motion: I move to accept the December 18, 2025, Charter Revision Commission Meeting Minutes.

By: Elsesser Second: Murphy

Discussion/Edits:
- Pg. 3, Under Item 6, Section 5-1, 2nd paragraph, 1st sentence, add "rhetorically" after "Murphy", to read "Murphy rhetorically questioned".
- Pg. 4, 2nd paragraph, 3rd line down, change "not" to "now" to read, "It was clarified that the Director of Civil Defense is now referred to as the Director of Emergency Management.
- Pg. 7, Under Section 5-18 Constables, 1st sentence, change "Title to remain the same" to "Title to remain the same as referred to in State Statutes."

Motion: I move to accept the December 18, Charter Revision Commission Meeting Minutes as amended.

By: Elsesser Second: Gallegos-Ramirez

Vote: Unanimously in favor

4. Discussion with Town Registrars:
Karen Powers (Republican Registrar of Voters) and Sandye Simon (Democrat Registrar of Voters) were in attendance to answer questions and discuss the Registrar of Voters section of the Charter.

Murphy commented that one of the biggest changes the Commission has discussed surrounding the Registrar of Voters is a potential switch from 2 districts to 1.

Simon and Powers highlighted the following:

- Poll workers are paid staff; switching from 2 districts to 1 would result in staffing costs savings.
- Even though there are 2 districts, the ballots are the same, and districts are voting on the same people.
- Originally the reason for the 2 districts was due to the town being split by the 2 Congressional Churches established in town. However, this was early in the town's establishment, and this is an outdated reason to keep 2 districts.
- There are other municipalities similar to size to Coventry who operate as 1 district with no issue.
- If Coventry switched to 1 district, 3 tabulators would be used for a smoother process.
- The printed results for certification would be on 1 slip, which would be easier for verification.
- Alternative voting locations have been considered. The top choice was the Senior Center, but with the Summer Camps in session, parking would be significantly reduced.
- Current locations of either Firehouse or CHS are the best spots for capacity and parking.

It was suggested to edit the Charter language to state that Coventry is required to have at least 1 voting district. This way the number of districts is not specified, and the town can adapt to have more districts as needed. It was requested to have the Town Attorney review that this language is appropriate for allowing flexibility with state and federal changes.

The Commission discussed that it seems everyone is leaning towards going from 2 districts to 1 for cost savings, efficiency, and simplicity. Simon and Powers were thanked for their valuable input.

Petro noted that the voting locations do not need to be included in the Charter. However, he questioned whether the Registrar of Voters gets pushback from using CHS. It was noted that the BOE and Superintendent don't like losing a school day. This past election the BOE and Superintendent chose to keep school in session in order to not lose a school day. Simon informed that this past election things were put into place to allow the school to remain open during voting. There were a few frustrated students and staff members. Luckily, parking was not an issue. The Registrars stated that parking was not an issue during this election but will be for a Presidential Election. However, the BOE stated they would close the school for that election.

Taylor noted that a question came up around Section 2-4 regarding breaking a tie. He continued that the language at the end states, "Any voting machine, the returns from which are not subject to disagreement, may be unlocked and used in said special election. If voting machines are not available in sufficient number, paper ballots may be used in place of or in conjunction with voting machines.". There was a question about whether this language was outdated or not.

Powers explained that the state mandated Coventry to take 9 tabulators when only 5 are needed. If a tabulator went down, it would be replaced with another one. Voting machines are no longer used. They also stated that the only time they would need to switch to paper ballots would be if they ran out of the ballots used in the tabulators. While that could happen, it is unlikely based on voter turnout. Simon and Powers explained that they always order more tabulator ballots than they expect to turnout, just in case.

It was felt that the language does not need to remain in the Charter as the voting machines are not marked, and all the voting data is on a jump drive that gets removed and uploaded. They felt the sentence could be removed as it is outdated. Powers explained that the Registrar of Voters follow the state regulations, so having this language in the Charter is unnecessary. Simon felt that the language stating that paper ballots could be used should remain.

Murphy explained that the language they are discussing is what is currently in the Charter. However, he had previously suggested removing that language and replacing it with the following language:

"Any tabulator or other voting equipment approved by the Secretary of the State may be prepared for use in the adjourned election, provided that the returns from the preceding election are not subject to a re-canvas, discrepancy, or challenge, as defined by the Connecticut General Statutes, or in guidance issued by the Secretary of State. If additional equipment is needed, or if tabulators are unavailable, or insufficient in number for the adjourned election, ballots may be used in accordance with the Connecticut General Statutes and the procedures prescribed by the Secretary of State."

Powers and Simon agreed this language is fine to replace the outdated one.

5. Discussion with Town Clerk:

Town Clerk, Lori Tollman was present to answer Commission questions related to the Town Clerks Office. Tollman also shared some insights and suggestions for editing the Town Clerk section of the Charter.

Tollman shared her thoughts on the following:

- Section 9-1, the sentence that states, "At the annual budget meeting a majority of those present and voting may, by amendment to the main motion, reduce, but not increase, any Town Council recommended appropriation."
    - Tollman felt this needs to be defined so that it does not mean individual line items.
    - This stems from an incident at last year's Annual Town Meeting where a resident proposed leaving the budget the same but reducing certain line items. Staff had to call the Town Attorney during the meeting to get clarification on how it is interpreted, and what is allowed. It took a long time to get the answer and was disruptive to the meeting.
    - Tollman suggested rewording it so that it is clarified that the total could be decreased but not individual line items.
    - Drumm added that this resident was trying to reduce certain line items to take the money out of the Town Budget to add it to the BOE.
- Tollman also suggested that the Commission consider changing the date of the Annual Town Meeting to another day besides Saturday. She noted that the same people always show up to the meetings as Saturdays are typically busy for families for various reasons. She hoped that attendance would increase if the meeting were held on a weeknight.

Tollman questioned about including something in the Charter about the BOE allowing use of their facilities for elections. Elsesser felt this could be worthwhile to have this in the Charter. Murphy suggested Talyor add it to the list of questions for the attorney to get their opinion on including language that states the BOE can't deny the use of BOE buildings for an election. He was curious whether it would be more appropriate for the Charter, an ordinance, or not at all.

Drumm commented that there are good working relations with the BOE, and they benefit from both Budget Referendums and Elections, and BOE candidates are voted on too. Elsesser added that the residents of Coventry like seeing the buildings they've paid for too.

Tollman also agreed with the potential concerns Elsesser brought up regarding Section 3-2, Presiding Officer, regarding the Town Council being sworn in on the 1st Wednesday after the election. She explained that she has never thought of it, but hearing Elsesser's comments and concerns, she realized that there have been times where the results aren't yet certified, numbers have not been sent to the Secretary of State, or there needs to be a recount. She agreed that the currently proposed change of 2 business days after certification would work to alleviate concerns.

Tollman also asked to consider doing the swearing in at the beginning of the year, and if there was a known reason why that isn't done. Drumm explained that he has worked in communities that have done that before, but there were potential concerns surrounding disgruntled Town Council members who did not get reelected. Elsesser suggested that more time is reasonable, and the Commission could add to the Charter that the outgoing Council is not to meet except on an emergency basis. He suggested confirming this is allowed with the Town Attorney. A vindictive outgoing Town Council could make negative decisions that have a negative impact on the town. This could include personnel decisions like firing the Town Manager.

Murphy commented that it has not been an issue, and shared concerns that editing the Chater too drastically, or making edits to address issues that have not been a problem will make it difficult to pass the Charter revisions at referendum. He felt that if the 2 business days after the Council certification solves the concerns, then it should be a sufficient enough change.

Tollman reminded that the referendum question to adopt the Charter changed needs to be to the Secretary of the State by September 4th. She also asked if the Commission plans on proposing 1 question, or more. The Commission felt that 1 question is a better, more simple option for the public. The only reason this would change would be if there was a controversial change that needed to be a separate question.

6. Review of Changes from Prior Meetings:

Petro proposed adding Murphy's proposed language to section 2-4, as the Registrar of Voters were in support of the change. The Charter Revision Commission was unanimously in favor of this change. The change is as follows:

- Section 2-4: 2nd to last sentence, change "Any voting machine, the returns from which are not subject to disagreement, may be unlocked and used in said special election." to "Any tabulator or other voting equipment approved by the Secretary of the State may be prepared for use in the adjourned election, provided that the returns from the preceding election are not subject to a re-canvas, discrepancy, or challenge, as defined by the Connecticut General Statutes, or in guidance issued by the Secretary of State. If additional equipment is needed, or if tabulators are unavailable, or insufficient in number for the adjourned election, ballots may be used in accordance with the Connecticut General Statutes and the procedures prescribed by the Secretary of State."

Other suggested changes:

- Sections 1-3 and Section 2-1(a)-Make the wording consistent in both sections, so the following phrase reads as follows, "Constitution and general law of the State of Connecticut", and make sure that "Constitution" is capitalized in all locations.
- Section 2-1(b), 3rd line change "the first Wednesday" to "two business days after their certification" to be consistent with Section 3-2.
- Section 3-1, 1st line, leave the "the" outside of quotations so that it reads, "the "Town Council".
- Section 5-2, 5th line up from the bottom, the word "Town" is missing the "T".
- In Chapter 6, Elective Offices, include reference to statutory provisions for each office.
    - Murphy also supplied new language for the Town Attorney, as they do not have a statutory position.
    - Murphy proposed a new section at the end to automatically update the Charter with changes to statutory language, as a way to future proof the document.
- Section 5-3 Appointments, there is a reference to Section 5-1, that needs to be changed to Section 6-1 since the Chapters were swapped.

Taylor clarified that after reaching out to the Town Attorney, they confirmed that the only office that is required to be in the Charter is the Town Manager. The other offices currently listed are required by State Statute, so the Town needs to have them, but they are not required to be identified in the Charter. Taylor questioned if there was any desire to remove positions if not required to be listed in the Charter.

Elsesser reminded that the last Charter failed because positions were proposed to be removed, and a certain employee felt that they were trying to get rid of her position. Regardless of this being untrue, they raised enough support in opposition of the proposed Charter changes, and the revision failed at referendum.

It was noted that discussions previously took place about removing positions that were not required to be in the Charter. However, since none of the offices are required to be in the Charter, the Commission felt that it wasn't a good idea to removal all, or even a few, based on concerns of how that would be perceived.

Gallegos-Ramirez suggested that the Charter can simply state that "The following positions are appointed by the Town Manager", and then they could be listed, rather than having them as their own separate sections with the same wording. Elsesser commented that he felt there was a benefit in leaving all the wording in the Charter for clarity and not having to look for the statutory language in another document. There was some back and forth about this, and other suggestions, but the Commission ultimately decided to make a note to revisit this topic once all Commission members were in attendance.

There was a brief discussion about requiring Town Council approval for appointing positions. Elsesser cautioned against this, as it could discourage candidates from taking the job because of the extra time it takes to get approvals. Drumm noted he has not experienced this problem but explained it could delay start dates as well. Murphy offered a counterpoint as a concern that if approval power is taken away from the Town Council, then the Charter isn't going to move forward for referendum.

Elsesser stated that if they are going to leave the ones already in the Charter, then more positions requiring Town Council approval should not be added. Additionally, it was suggested to remove some positions from the list, like Tree Warden and Animal Control Officer. The Commission seemed agreeable to this but are going to revisit once all Commission members are in attendance.

<u>7. Review and Discussion of Charter Chapter V (Formerly Chapter VI)-Town Manager:</u>

<u>Section 5-1. Appointments:</u>

Elsesser commented that in the first sentence it states, "previously established hiring procedure", which he interpreted as meaning the Town Council wouldn't be able to change the way the Town Manager was hired. Petro felt there was a legal ambiguity to it, allowing the Town Council to disregard previously established procedures and have a meeting about how to hire the Town Manager.

Liptrap asked if there should be (a) a contractual amount of time given and (b) a requirement to appoint an interim Town Manager until the position is filled.

Drumm noted that it could take a while to find and select a candidate, who then fails the background check, leaving the Town Council to start over. He commented that in this case, it's not the best idea to have the duration limited. He additionally informed that there is an employment agreement that is in place for the Town Manager.

Murphy questioned if the employment agreement states that the Town Manager position is the only full-time job to be held, Drumm confirmed. He added that there are other limited things he can do, like teaching, but it does require informing the Town Council of other responsibilities.

<u>Section 5-2. Duties of the Town Manager:</u>

Murphy suggested removing the office of probate court, as Coventry does not have one. Drumm explained that Coventry participates in a regional Probate Court with Tolland and Vernon, and the reference to it in this section is accurate.

Drumm explained that he read through Section 5-2 and thought it was well written. He compared it to others; some were more detailed, but he felt that it was not necessary here as it does not need to look like the Commission is changing everything.

It was suggested to make a bulleted (lettered) list of all the duties currently separated by semi-colon for easier readability. The Commission was in favor of this change. Elsesser suggested that with the change, the last 2 sentences should be moved up before the list of duties.

<u>Section 5-3. Appointments:</u>

Drumm commented that this section states that he can appoint the offices listed in Section 5-1, but it does not state that he has the authority to appoint everyone else. He commented that it is likely stated in State Statute, but it might be a good idea to clarify, it in this section by adding something along the lines of, "the Town Manager shall appoint and terminate all other employees, with the exception of the Board of Education."
Murphy commented that he will workshop some language for the next meeting for Commission review. This will be revisited.

Liptrap asked if there are any instances when the Town Council needs to be involved in the termination of a staff member. Drumm explained no, because the termination of administration is not supposed to be a political decision. Drumm explained that if the Town Council was involved with firing employees, there could be potential situations where he is outvoted to keep a person in office. Elsesser explained that when an administration member is terminated, the Town Council is notified and can discuss it during an executive session.

Drumm also suggested putting wording in the Charter allowing him to appoint as Acting Deputy Town Manager in the case of an unplanned absence/emergency that does not have to wait until a Town Council meeting. He added that if the Town Council does not like the appointment, they have the authority to change it in a special or regular meeting. However, it would not leave the town without a manger in this case. He reminded that those he could appoint are trusted staff he currently works will like the Finance Director, Police Chief, Fire Chief, etc. He also stated he is putting together a resolution for the short term in case of an unplanned absences, with a list of Acting Deputy Town Managers who could be appointed to the position with short notice.

Murphy agreed that someone needs to be able to step in without having to wait for a Town Council meeting. The suggested language provided by Drumm will be reviewed to be implemented into the Charter. Drumm clarified that there is a succession plan in place during the event of an emergency. Murphy questioned if there was a need for 2 mechanisms, if there is already a succession plan. Drumm explained that yes, as there are different scenarios. For a declared emergency, the succession is Finance Director, then Police Chief, then the Director of the DPW. However, Drumm explained that if he needed to appoint someone today, outside of an emergency situation, he would appoint the Director of the DPW because the Police Chief is busier responding to calls, whereas the DPW Director may have more time to fill in as Acting Town Manager.

It was agreed that language should be put into the Charter. The Commission liked the language supplied by Drumm as it still allows the Town Council full oversight. Murphy suggested clarifying that majority approval is needed. Murphy questioned if there needs to be a duration limit. Drumm explained that if there is a concern by the Town Council of an Acting Town Manager, they could remove them. If things were going well, then there would be no need to remove them. Murphy was concerned that this would put a lot of pressure on an Acting Town Manager, as they would have responsibilities of the Town Manager along with their other full-time responsibilities. Drumm noted that the Town Manager responsibilities would become their main focus. If the Town Manager's absence was long term, and there was a time limit on how long someone could be appointed for, it may put the Town Council in a position where they have to appoint another Acting Town Manager starting at the beginning, until a replacement is hired. Murphy commented at that point they would likely designate an Interim Town Manager.

Gallegos-Ramirez suggested that after a certain amount of time, the Town Council can review performance, etc. Drumm explained that an Acting Town Manager's performance would be reviewed likely at every Town Council meeting.

Murphy commented that the matter is more complex than he originally thought, and felt it needs more consideration before changes are made.

Liptrap asked if the head of the Town Council could ever become the Acting Town Manager. Drumm explained no, because they are not town staff.

The Commission had consensus to revisit this section following further review of Drumm's suggested language.

Murphy questioned what happens if the Town Council revokes the Town Manager's designation. Drumm explained that the Town Council would need to designate someone else. Petro clarified that this is stated in Section 5-3.

<u>Chapter 5-Final Suggestions Summary:</u>

- Section 5-1, 3rd line, change "The Town Manager" to the "Town Manager".
- Section 5-2, 'letter' list the Town Manager duties, and move the last 2 sentences of the section to follow "G.S. 7-193".

<u>8. Review and Discussion of Charter Chapter VII-Bonds and Compensation:</u>

<u>Section 7-1. Official Bonds:</u>

Elsesser suggested that the attorney be asked to research what bonds are necessary under State Statutes. He noted that there are sometimes general bonds for all employees. He continues that the attorney should look into specific bond requirements, what still exists, or if any have been repealed. Drumm clarified that in a lot of cases insurance policies are taking the place of bonds. Murphy questioned if the bonds are required by State Statue or by the Town Council. Elsesser commented that this would be for legal counsel to clarify, as well as have the appropriate State Statutes referenced if necessary.

Murphy clarified that the attorney should be asked what bonds are required, and if it is at the discretion of the Town Council if no bonds are required.

Murphy asked Drumm if he could share what is currently in place. Drumm responded no. Elsesser added that this section isn't currently being adhered to. Murphy commented that premiums are still being paid for by the town. Elsesser agreed and stated there is protection but clarified that this section is requiring each employee to fill out their own bond forms, which he does not think is being done.

It was discussed that there is liability insurance on all staff through the town's insurance provider CIRMA, but there are certain employees who have bonds. Elsesser continued that the current language doesn't reflect the framework that the town is currently using. Elsesser suggested that the attorney also be asked if the coverage through CIRMA meeting the statutory authority. If not, the town needs to make some changes. He also commented that certain positions need to have bonds, which he needs the attorney to clarify.

Section 7-2. Compensation:

Murphy noticed there is a missing "T" in town on the 1st line. He also questioned if the town still uses a systemic pay plan. Elsesser explained that this language pre-dates the town unions. Drumm added that there are 6 different contracts that establish pay. It was discussed that the pay plan is outdated based on how salaried and hourly employees are paid.

Murphy questioned if the Charter states that pay is determined by the Town Manager, and approved by the Town Council, if that would be sufficient. Drumm explained that pay amounts vary case by case, so a standardized pay plan would not work. They may offer 2 people in the same position (that have the same pay plan) different hourly rates due to factors like experience, employee retention, or if they are a new hire.

Elsesser suggested included language along the lines of, "compensation of all salaried and hourly employees of the town shall be within budgetary limits." Drumm agreed with that language, but proposed adding "as approved by Council" at the end.

Liptrap asked if Drumm hires someone who is a non-union, salaried position, who double checks/approves the pay rate selected. Drumm confirmed no one does. He added that as the pay offered is usually on par with the current market for that position and within the approved budget. He emphasized that he can't ever bring someone on board for higher than the line item allows in the budget.

Murphy suggested the following language be used, "Compensation of all salaried and hourly rate employees of the town shall be determined by the Town Manager, as contained in the budget or approved by the Town Council."

There was a detailed discussion with examples of why this wording wouldn't cover everything, especially positions that are partially or entirely funded by grants. The Commission agreed to workshop some language between now and the next meeting to see what would work best for the Charter.

Chapter 7-Fnal Suggestions Summary:

- Section 7-1: Taylor to reach out to the attorney for more information/clarification.
- Section 7-2: The Commission will work on adequate language to use regarding employee compensation.

9. Planning of Meetings and Discussion of Charter With Town Staff:

Petro suggested that the next meeting agenda does not include anything other than a review of previous changes, revisiting items noted, and a review and discussion of Charter Chapter VIII-Finance and Taxation.

Taylor noted that at the next meeting the Commission was scheduled to have the Finance Director and Tax Collector come in for a discussion. Petro requested that they be contacted to see if they can come to the following meeting.

There were no available meeting locations or dates that would allow for a quorum for the Commission to meet later in the month to make up for the missed meeting earlier this month.

Current meeting schedule is as follows:

- Wednesday, Feb. 4th-Revisting previous changes and notes, and a review and discussion of Chapter 8.
- Thursday, Feb. 19th-Discussion with the Finance Director and Tax Collector.

10. Other Business:

Taylor confirmed the following requests and changes:

- Future agendas: Agenda items to read, "Review Changes from Prior Meetings".
- Ask the attorney about language for voting districts, with the requirement that there should be at least 1, with others being created by ordinance as needed.
- Capitalize the word, "constitution" in Section 2-1(b), and change the language in Section 2-1(b) to use the language "2 business days" from Town Council appointment, as reflected in Section 3-1.
- Add Murphy's proposed language in Section 2-4 regarding breaking a tie.
- Add revisit comment for Section 6, about positions to be maintained in the Charter.
- Reformat Section 5-2, for the duties of the Town Manager, to be a lettered list and the last sentence of that section be moved above the list of duties.
- Change the reference of 5-1 to 6-1.
- Add a revisit comment to Section 5-3, regarding proposed language for Acting Town Manager.
- Ask the attorney which bonds are required by staff, if any. If there are none, is it at the discretion of the Town Council. Also verify with CIRMA if they are covering the towns statutory requirements of Section 7-1.
- Add a revisit comment to Section 7-2 about structuring language as it pertains to funding/compensation.

11. Adjournment:

The meeting was adjourned by unanimous vote at 9:04 PM

Respectfully Submitted,

Nicole Archambault

Nicole Archambault, Minutes Clerk

PLEASE NOTE: These minutes are not official until approved by the Charter Revision Commission at the next Charter Revision Commission meeting. Please see the next Charter Revision Commission meeting minutes for approval or changes to these minutes.