

Framingham Charter Commission Minority Report

As a Framingham citizen and Charter Commissioner, I urge Framingham residents to read this report and the full charter carefully and **VOTE NO on the proposed city charter**. It puts too much control and power into the hands of just a few, drastically cuts public participation and representation, and it does not guarantee positive change.

On March 29, 2016 Framingham voters were asked: *Shall a commission be elected to frame a charter for Framingham?* Many voters thought a “yes” vote meant that **both** town and city options would be studied and considered. They weren’t. Nor were different forms of city deliberated at any length. I tried to bring the voice of those voters to the table but the commissioners’ minds were made up. I am concerned that my experience is just a taste of what is to come under the proposed city controlled by a powerful few driven by making quicker but not necessarily the best decisions.

Too Much Power in Too Few Hands

Mayor

The proposed city charter creates one of the strongest mayor positions possible. For example, it gives the mayor power to hand pick more than 160 people to serve as officers and on boards, commissions and committees. Additionally, the mayor has the full authority to hire and fire every manager at the two top levels of municipal government (except the Auditor, Clerk and Secretary of the Council). In most cases, these appointments don’t require actual confirmation. Tremendous power is being placed in the hands of a politician whose only job requirements are to live in Framingham and be at least 18 years old. Framingham could be controlled by an unqualified campaigner funded by strong financial interests, both within and outside Framingham. A lot of damage can be done in four years.

City Council

Framingham is currently divided into 18 precincts with elected representatives in each. The proposed charter redraws the lines, creating nine larger new districts. It proposes having one councilor elected from each of nine districts and two councilors elected “at large.” If the two “at large” councilors are elected from the same district, three councilors could be from one district. This doesn’t ensure fair, balanced representation.

Currently many representatives from across town keep a watchful eye over the town’s budget, bylaws and zoning. This charter reduces that oversight to only a handful. A majority vote of the council means that **as few as six** people (from as few as four districts) can control all the decisions.

Professional Politicians will Replace Citizen Volunteers

Communities experience negative change when decisions are influenced more by big money agendas than by residents’ concerns. Mayoral contests are expensive. In 2015 candidates in Waltham (close in size to Framingham) spent \$207K+ and two mayoral candidates in Quincy spent \$861K. Big money comes with strings attached and helps incumbents stay in power. This totally changes local politics and makes it hard for new candidates with fresh ideas to “break in.”

City council elections will also be costly. Candidates now run for town offices with doable campaign costs and effort. Without access to big bucks and a campaign team, ordinary residents are likely to be out of luck serving the community in any elected capacity.

City Development Can Be Expected

If Framingham becomes a city it could more easily be developed like one. Zoning and permitting decisions will no longer be made by a planning board elected by the people and Town Meeting Members looking out for neighborhoods. That degree of checks and balances will be gone. The mayor will appoint like-minded people to the planning board and zoning board of appeals. If the mayor supports development of tall, dense apartment complexes (potentially built by generous campaign contributors), that's what Framingham will get. The look, feel and quality of life in Framingham will permanently reflect that.

Citizen Relief Measures Are Almost Impossible to Use

The charter gives the appearance of allowing citizens to bring initiatives forward or reverse bad government decisions but in reality it's extremely difficult. For example, if you seek reconsideration of a vote by the school committee or city council your only option is to gather thousands of registered voters' signatures on a petition within just 30 days. To understand how hard that is - it took two years for proponents to get thousands of signatures for the charter commission ballot question and that was using paid help.

Charter Changes Are Difficult to Make

When people express concern with parts of the charter they're told it will automatically be reviewed in five years. Be warned, the review is done by an appointed committee, hand-picked by those already in power. Even if that committee recommends changes, the city council is not compelled to place the suggested changes before the voters.

In Closing

The other commissioners portray Framingham as broken and dysfunctional. It's not. It has its challenges - as all communities do. But look around you - Framingham has been making great progress and it's a large, vibrant, diverse community with excellent services and quality of life. We can and should improve our government but we shouldn't dismantle it for the sake of change. There are other options and better opportunities for change. This is not the right one for Framingham.

No data has been presented supporting the idea that Framingham will be better off as a city. We've seen no evidence that tax rates will go down, schools will get better, traffic will flow smoother, state funding will increase, neighborhoods will have a bigger voice, or development will be more appropriate with these changes. However, it is clear this proposed city charter fractures citizen involvement, decreases representation, puts too much power in the hands of a few and opens the door to the influence of big money.

Framingham is a great community in which to live, learn, work and play! Let's not risk losing that. PLEASE VOTE NO on this proposed city charter April 4TH, 2017.

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