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**Public Hearing Charter Revision
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Ken Edgar called the meeting to order at 7:30pm.

Bob Uzenoff- Mr. Uzenoff said that his background with Town government as it relates to the Charter has to do largely with his service on the Parks and Recreation Commission. He was chair for approximately six or seven years and has served on several Committees or Select Committees and wanted to say that nothing comes to mind that he is aware of that needs to be changed with the Charter in his experience with Town government. He has not heard what any suggestions for changes are. There might be one that sounds good to him but nothing comes to mind.

In terms of working with Town government, the Town Code, the regulations and ordinances, he thinks we would have a more informed electorate and group of volunteers if there was a copy of the aggregated Town Code with all the rules and regulations in it and electronically available on the internet which we do not have.

Ms. Weinstein said we are working on that and we started looking into a company that will provide it. Mr. Uzenoff said that all the instruction that they came to need in the groups that he has been in they have gotten from Town Attorneys or from the Selectmen or the Town Administrator. Mr. Tracey asked if Mr. Uzenoff saw a requirement for codifying or making available the code or ordinances as being something that should be in the Charter. Mr. Uzenoff asked if the Charter spoke to the Code. Mr. Edgar said that it never mentions it. Mr. Uzenoff said that maybe that would be a thought to establish a place where the Town regulations would be kept. Ms. Moch said that in the Charters that she has reviewed the Town Code is separate from the Charter but they can refer to all the documents together. The Charter is sort of the overall Town Code. They have the Charter and then they have the ordinances and Town Code, so it is two separate documents.

Margaret Wirtenberg- Margaret said she was speaking on behalf of the League of Women Voters steering committee which met this morning. They wanted to let the committee know that they have done some studies specifically. The study they did was about the Town meeting. No one has wanted to touch the Charter. There will be a written description of what the LWV's did that will be forthcoming when they get to that chapter. They are the group that basically agitated for a Board of Ethics.

Mr. Edgar said if there is a study or other comments that LWV has that they should not hold back. The more in advance that they receive such material the more they will be able to incorporate it into their agenda and be prepared to intelligently discuss it as they get to the topic. Arne de Keijzer said at the steering committee of the LWV's this morning they voted to disband their formal study of the Town Charter. They will have input and Helen de Keijzer will be here tonight to give the Committee the League's position on the Town Meeting. Nina Daniel said one of the things that was mentioned at the steering committee meeting was a thought that the Charter Revision Committee have a public hearing

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specifically on the issue of the referendum, at the time they discuss the referendum to get public input on that issue.

Dennis Tracey said that they will have public input at every one of their meetings if the public is interested and the agendas will clearly show what we are going to be covering. There will be prior notice when they cover the referendum point and the public will be permitted and encouraged to attend. They may decide that there is such interest in that that they may have a public hearing separately.

Frank Billone- Mr. Billone said that he believes the Annual Town Budget Meeting (ATBM) is an old invaluable practice. It provides taxpayers an opportunity to express their feelings regarding the proposed budgets and as such should be retained. With Weston now spending in excess of 66 million dollars annually it is more important than ever to get approval from as many taxpayers as possible that the budget is acceptable.

The problem as he sees it is that the 200 or so people who attend the ATBM each year may not represent the interest of all the taxpayers. As such he believes that the referendum passed two years ago to require a secret ballot was historic and is a new invaluable practice. He believes the secret ballot enables several key elements. First it provides taxpayers an opportunity to vote at a time that is convenient for them rather than very late one Thursday evening.

Secondly it provides everyone a means to vote their conscience without fear of retribution. Lastly he believes the secret ballot is a powerful tool, it ensures that the will of the people will be taken into account when actually constructing the budgets. For those reasons he asks the secret ballot be made part of the Town Charter to ensure that all Taxpayer have an opportunity to be heard.

The last comment he would like to make is that last year the voter turnout was a bit lower than the year before, and was this because the budget increases were so small, which may actually support some of his comments. Ask yourself this question, what do you think the voter turnout would have been had the school board proposed a 5% increase in their budget which is roughly the amount that the salary line increased last year.

Ken Edgar read a letter from **Martha Diamant**.

“As part of our rights in a democracy, the residents of Weston are able to vote in private for whomever they feel is the best candidate to lead our Town, State or Nation. I believe this right is a key factor in making America great. It also resonates with civility and fairness. Our Town and School Budgets votes the last two years have embraced this principle and resulted in a much higher voter turnout. In addition, voters did not have to withstand any group or peer pressure. I recommend the Charter Revision Commission incorporate in the Charter a secret ballot as the standard voting method for approving or not approving Town and School Budgets. In addition I would recommend that the Charter mandate a secret paper ballot at the Annual Town Budget Meeting (ATBM) for any vote involving the lowering of any recommendation of the Board of Finance or related process change.”

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Helen de Keijzer- Ms. De Keijzer said she was here to let this group know about a position that has existed with the League of Women Voters. These positions come about after study of particular questions, and coming to consensus process. If they are successful they have a position at the end of that process. This one is in regard to voter participation in Weston Town Meetings some of which is clearly what the commission is discussing and in a way what Martha was just speaking to.

Voter participation in Weston Town Meeting. The League of Women Voters of Weston with the objective of increasing voter participation in Town Meetings urges Weston Town Government to adopt the following measures.

1. Provide for secret balloting for example by paper ballot, machine ballot, absentee ballot and, if permitted by the State, on the internet.
2. Provide an additional opportunity to vote on a weekday or Saturday following a Town Meeting.
3. Provide full and current information about upcoming Town Meetings through the use of various media/communication tools including print, newspaper, etc, public access television and the internet, Weston Town website, email alerts etc.
4. Provide for regular public access television coverage of Town Meetings.

The league in order to come to a position will look into the matter and see which process tends to produce a higher turnout for a Town Meeting and if these things seem to be helpful. Mr. Edgar asked if they were more concerned with turnout at the Town Meeting or turnout at the secret ballot process. Ms. De Keijzer said in a way it is both.

Mr. Bochinski said for the ATBM we have the technical capacity in the High School Auditorium to televise. He will find out more about it as the process goes on. Mr. Edgar said the scope of what they are doing relates to the terms of the Charter so we have to ask ourselves, would we put a Charter provision that said you had to televise.

Harvey Bellin- Mr. Bellin said that the ATBM was televised last time. There was a decision made to not broadcast it live. The decision was based on the idea that people that might want to attend would not so instead it was rebroadcast every day subsequent to that and before the secret ballot voting.

What everyone else has said is pretty much what he covered last time in terms of

1. Institutionalize all day private ballot voting.
2. Do not revise the current regulations that would let people at the ATBM increase spending because of some of the examples he gave last time about what special interest groups could do.
3. Look at easing the threshold of the call for a secret ballot if someone proposes a reduction in a line item as it is currently permitted.

Mr. Bellin said there was comment made last time about getting rid of the Town Administrator and he feels that is a bad idea.

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Mr. de Keijzer said if the Town Charter were to adopt a secret ballot process then his third point would be obliterated. Mr. Bellin said that would be at the evening ATBM. At the evening ATBM if someone said they want to reduce this line item by x amount and then would like to have a secret ballot, now you need to have 50% plus one to do that and he is saying it would be helpful if that threshold were lower.

Mr. Tracey asked if there was any benefit in Mr. Bellin's mind of public voting at all. Mr. Bellin said in the past there has been intimidation by people who, particularly special interest groups, felt they were standing up publicly against their cherished items. In speaking with citizens of this Town many of them will not show up for these types of meetings because they are afraid of being shunned, or other forms of punishment, so he feels that public discussion and public voting can be useful but in places where a person might feel in jeopardy by casting a particular vote he thinks it is problematic. When there was discussion about building the extra school people who spoke against it were retaliated against.

Ms. Moch asked if that was 10 years ago. Mr. Bellin said yes. She asked if he was aware of any instances in the last few years. Mr. Bellin said no that's why you get 150 people showing up for the ATBM. Ms. Moch asked if it wasn't a function of the fact that we are not discussing 80 million dollar budgets or bonds and that as long as things are moving along smoothly people aren't has invested as they would have been with a major issue like the schools. Mr. Bellin agreed but one cannot predict what subsequent budgets might be.

Mr. de Keijzer asked what he meant by retaliation. Mr. Bellin said mailboxes were trashed, people were shunned, children got harsh comments from other children in the schools and that was reported by a number of people but it was ten years ago. Ms. Moch asked if there was any way to set up a mechanism so if there were people who felt that they had been intimidated they could get comments to the committee that they did not release to the public. She said could we find out if there are concrete examples of this going on.

Mr. Bliss said that he was First Selectman when they voted the first time on the schools and when they had the revote on the 3-4-5 school. He had a couple of people come to him and said that they felt uncomfortable. He did not hear any incidents of trashing mail boxes or things like that. Ms. Moch asked are we trying to find a preventative for a problem that may not exist.

Mr. Tracey said even in the absence of demonstrated instances of intimidation physical or verbal there is the question of if a secret ballot may be appropriate because people feel more comfortable expressing their views privately rather than being faced with a crowd that disagrees with them. Mr. de Keijzer said that there is a tradition of the Town Meeting of people being able to speak their mind, to vote their conscience and have respect for that position no matter how it turns out. He recognizes the point but he weighs it against the tradition of the ability of all of us to speak our minds and to be respected for it.

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Mr. Bochinski said the school building project is the most apt example of this. There were public hearings where there were great passions on both sides of this and he witnessed some of that. We had three different referendums on all those related issues, there was a private ballot, full day voting available and it was partially voted on in June of 2001 then it was all revised and came back in November of 2001 or late October and that one was passed. Then that was challenged a few years later and all of that was secret ballot and those things approved the building project of the school.

Margaret Wirtenberg gave another example of the secret ballot working when the Town purchased a piece of property. A member of the PTO called for the secret ballot because they did not want to vote against a fellow member of the PTO who was now going to be living next to the school project.

Mr. Edgar said that they are going to have to special meetings in September. September 17 at 11:00am in the Town Hall Meeting Room and on September 24th at 11:00 in the Town Hall Meeting Room. Those meetings are in addition to the regularly scheduled meeting on September 21, at 7:30pm in the meeting room. The purposes of those meetings are to hear from town officials with regard to their comments on the Charter. On September 17, they will hear Stephan Grozinger, Dan Gilbert, Mike O'Brien, September 21, Phil Schaefer, Gayle Weinstein and September 24, David Muller and Woody Bliss.

One of their goals is to get their agendas up really early and in detailed fashion so the public will know well in advance. They will inform the Weston Forum and other media.

They have on the way the project of identifying the Towns that they wish to study the Charter of. He would like to get some views of that before the end of September so when they start discussing substance they can discuss what are the other towns that they agree that they are going to look at and how do they handle these kinds of issues.

Ms. Moch said that Easton does not have a Charter. Mr. Bliss said neither does Redding. Mr. Bochinski said that there was discussion about having some reference to a history of our Town Charter. The only professional historian who has ever worked on the Town wrote the book "Forging of a Connecticut Town" published in 1979 just before the revised charter. He has one sentence in the book "to formalize the system of self-government that already existed in Town, Westonites approved in 1967 their first Charter".

At 8:14pm Mr. Tracey made a motion to adjourn. Mr. Bochinski seconded and the motion passed unanimously.

Respectfully Submitted

Judy M. DeVito

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