

Framingham Council Chair addresses a full house in discussing their change of government.



Otto Fehlow Room, Plymouth Public Library.

Dennis Giombetti, the chair of the Framingham city council discussed the transition from a representative town meeting style to a mayor/ city council form a few years ago. He discussed the older families who had lived there for 50-70 years, including his parents, who were not anxious for any change even though they were almost 70,000 residents, versus the many new and younger residents, who had come from other city type governments with more transparency and faster reactions to situations.

The major reasons for the change were accountability, equal representation and diversity were the driving factors.

Framingham paid \$40,000 for a polling from a professional firm to show the benefits to every citizen from whatever walk of life, police, firefighter, teachers, homeowners union employees, retirees etc. There is a big focus on messaging, building credibility, careful with facts, no promises of big cuts, equity and fairness resonates with all, controlled budgets, missed opportunities from state and federal assistance and economic development. A town can have a mayor and council and still be called a town. The town mandated a mayor to be elected by the people and she is DR. Yvonne Spicer.

Their goal of gathering the approximately 6500 signatures to put it on the ballot required hiring a professional group of signers to get over the top. Most of the funds required to finance the signature drive came from the business community with no dollar limit on fund raising. One individual donated \$10,000. There are no campaign finance laws in effect for this effort. Previous charters had failed over 4 tries. The elected charter members were all somewhat involved in town government, so they had no vested interest in changing the form of government. The process took one year once a committee was established. There were two votes as required by state law. First to establish a charter committee to study various forms of government. The initial vote was overwhelming in favor of establishing a charter Committee. The final vote to convert Framingham from town meeting style of government to City charter was much closer as it passed by only 104 votes.

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Framingham hired a professional group from the University of Mass to write the charter. 70% of the charter is boiler plate language and they modeled theirs after Weymouth, who converted a few years earlier. Massachusetts allows 18 months to finalize a charter commission. The charter committee, in which Dennis was involved, structured their proposed government with strong mayor responsibilities, and a council of 11 members, 9 in precincts and 2 at large members. The nine precinct members had 2 year terms with a 12 year limit and the at large members had 4 year terms with a 12 year limit. They were paid \$5000 dollars as were the school committee and the council chair is paid \$7,500. He wished now they modified some of the responsibilities between the council and mayor which creates occasional tension on some matters. There is a required 5 year review in the early years with a committee appointed by 3 different departments.

The council meets twice a month, twenty-two times a year but can meet in 48 hours if required. The school committee is better represented from nine districts instead of 18 precincts previously. Each district has a representative on the school committee and the town.

The town returned some of the \$12 million in free cash to the taxpayers which was well received. The town had a split tax rate for many years between residential and commercial, and 78% of Framingham is residential but they only contribute 62% of the tax revenue. Commercial is 22% of the property, but they pay 38% of the real estate tax revenue.

The council plans to hire a researcher full time to help council members with legwork on potential changes they may want to implement in town and written communications.

A major portion of the meeting were audience generated questions and answers from the large gathering and the talk was well received by the those in attendance ending in a thunderous applause for the speaker.

