

**OLD COLONY MEMORIAL**

# Opinion/guest column: Plymouth deserves a fresh perspective with a charter commission

**Clark Corson** Guest column

Published 6:00 a.m. ET Mar. 7, 2021

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Plymouth, the first permanent settlement in the United States, has grown over the past 400 years from an initial colony of 102 to 63,411 in 2020. Our Town Meeting form of government, based on the egalitarian idea that all should have an equal say in their governance, has served us well for most of this time. But that is no longer the case. We have grown well beyond the stage where all participate in their government. In fact, very few Plymoutheans actually participate, resulting in an inefficient, bloated, unaccountable government with many conflicts of interest.

Based on population, Plymouth is the 15th largest municipality in Massachusetts. Of note, 40 towns smaller than Plymouth have already made the decision to convert to a city/council form of government. So, it is time to have an honest conversation about our future. Plymouth is a great community that has the resources, people power, and energy to be even better.

Though we have many well-meaning elected officials, who try their best on a volunteer basis to manage a fast escalating \$265M+ annual budget, we miss opportunities because of our lack of clear priorities, scattered decision-making and diffused authority. Having to replace a 25-year-old high school at an additional cost of \$100 million and a failed sewer line repair which cost another \$48.2 million are but two examples of amateur decision making from the top down.

The 3-year-old Plymouth Charter Transition Committee is a group of volunteers concerned about the direction Plymouth is headed for, so much in fact, that it stepped up and took on the arduous task of garnering signatures from 15% of Plymouth's registered voters. The successful efforts of the PCTC have succeeded in getting the requisite 7,136

signatures certified by the town clerk so the aforementioned ballot question shall appear on the ballot at the May 15, 2021, town election.

The PCTC takes no position on what changes, if any, should be. Getting this ballot question approved by the voters, however, is the first step necessary for Plymouth to modernize its government, which clearly has become an undertone throughout the community. The sole mission of the PCTC was to solicit enough signatures to put before the voters a ballot question of whether they (the voters) want to form a charter commission to make improvement recommendations and this herculean effort has been successful, but there is more to do.

If the ballot question is approved, by statute a charter commission would be charged with exploring the current form of town government and then collaboratively recommending to the electorate what a future form of government might look like.

### **Some answers to frequently asked questions:**

Plymouth is a great community in which to live, team, work and play,

however...

. Our current Town Meeting system of government is ineffective and unable to make efficient and informed decisions in a timely manner to keep up with the needs of a modern and complex community of over 60,000 people and to effectively represent the interests of all six of the community's villages (North Plymouth, West Plymouth, South Plymouth, Downtown, Manomet, Cedarville), which are scattered over 104 square miles.

. If the voters approve the ballot question, state law mandates that a charter commission shall conduct itself in a transparent, open and participatory manner reaching out to all segments of our diverse community. Its members must listen and be open to a variety of options, even those different than their own current views, before making any specific proposals to the voters.

. As the 15th most populous community in the commonwealth, Plymouth needs and deserves a strong, innovative and accountable executive, elected or appointed, that will advocate on every Plymouthean's behalf and effectively coordinate leaders in industry, government and the community.

. We need to replace Town Meeting with an accountable legislative branch that meets regularly (not twice a year), is elected by all Plymoutheans and is responsive to every

segment of our diverse community; this legislative branch (town/city council) must provide effective checks and balances to the executive branch of government guaranteeing that everyone's voice is heard in our decision-making process, which is hardly the situation in our community today. Plymouth's warrant process is convoluted at best: town manager > Select Board > precinct chairs > Finance Committee > motions meetings > and finally to the floor of the Town Meeting. Way too frequently, this time delayed process means that articles to be voted on are not available to Town Meeting members until the night before the actual Town Meeting at which time voting takes place. This discourages public input resulting in significantly little concrete action.

. There is general consensus that Plymouth's 400 year-old antiquated Town Meeting form of government can no longer manage our complex, diverse, and large community.

. State law prohibits Town Meeting from having any meaningful checks and balances on the executive branch of government. In fact, it is the executive that sets the agenda for Town Meeting and determines when and where Town Meeting shall meet. By meeting just twice a year, Town Meeting does not have the ability to follow issues closely or scrutinize expenditures carefully, and please note that presently Town Meeting members are exempt from the state's conflict of interest laws.

. Our community deserves a strong check and balance on the executive branch of government by scrutinizing expenditures carefully in a transparent way, holding elected officials accountable for their actions, and requiring them to follow the highest ethical standards.

. As for Town Meeting's so-called reforms, every five years or so as the town's moderator handpicks nine persons to serve on a Charter Review Committee; historically, the past 40 years have not resulted in any substantive changes in the way the town of Plymouth is governed and yet our town is no longer a town - it has grown into a city. Town Meeting members circle the wagon to create the mere appearance of reform, but these so-called reforms are new covers on the same old book.

. Town Meeting is filled with many dedicated and hard-working men and women, but that does not mitigate the frustrating process in which they try to do the community's business. Imagine if the same dedicated men and women work with a council that adhered to the strictest ethical standards, has strong checks and balances on the executive, and has the ability to actually implement priorities. As mentioned, Town Meeting government

is ineffective due in large part because it only meets twice a year whereas town/city councils typically meet a minimum of twice every month.

Of note, somewhere along the the line some Town Meeting members have come to believe that they are exempt from "conflict of interest" statutes; however, according to state law, town/city council members are not exempt from "conflict of interest" statutes.

Let's not miss this opportunity to reform, reconstitute, and reinvigorate our local government. Don't let misinformation prevent us from taking advantage of this generational opportunity, and together let's begin the process of reforming an outdated and unresponsive form of government to one more in tune with the times.

### **Myths about a charter commission**

Some entrenched insiders, who continue to wield influence within our town today with minimal ethical guidelines, want you to believe their fears in order to perpetuate the status quo rather than seize this opportunity to reform our antiquated and, in truth, less than democratic government.

So, let's clear up a few misconceptions:

**Fear: They're proposing radical change!**

In the past 32 years, 18 communities in Massachusetts have adopted a city format form of governance, and, with the exception in Framingham, every one of them was smaller than Plymouth. Plymouth is the 15th most populous community in Massachusetts and could become its 56th city. Voters could choose to adopt city status, but, in fact, officially remain in name as the Town of Plymouth.

**Fear: It is too fast**

Plymouth has twice voted on a similar ballot question but the wording of the ballot question was intentionally misleading as arranged by a previous nine-person charter committee (as opposed to a charter commission as mandated by state law). Opportunities for meaningful reform come but once every five years, which is what our charter provides for. In the past, a nine-person charter committee (nine people who decide what if any, recommendations should be made) were hand-picked by the town's moderator; whatever his personal agenda may be, his appointees have reflected insignificant changes to Plymouth's Charter by maintaining Plymouth's status quo, even though by every standard Plymouth qualifies as a city, with all the benefits inherent, thereof. This year 2021 will mark the moderator's 21st

consecutive year of making key committee appointments in our community. Why and how is this possible?

Fear: Our taxes and fees will go up!

They are already sky-high and continually climbing at a meteoric pace and noticeably faster than in other communities. Plymouth already has among the highest taxes, water and sewer bills and department budgets in comparable communities. This year, the average property tax bill will again increase by an average greater than \$365.

Fear: Does this mean we will have a mayor form of government if we vote for a charter commission?

The answer is not necessarily. It will be the job of a charter commission (nine members elected by the voters, not appointed by the town moderator) to make proposals from which the voters will choose, and there are several models to choose from. Whatever form a revised government may take will include the defined roles and responsibilities among the administration with strong checks and balances that ensure thoughtful, inclusive and balanced leadership on all of the important issues facing our community. In a system with identifiable and accountable changes, incompetent officials can be easily removed if Plymoutheans do not approve their performance.

Don't let fear prevent us from taking advantage of this generational opportunity, and together let's begin the process of reforming, reconstituting and reinvigorating America's oldest town into America's oldest town that qualifies for all the benefits accorded a city, including professional management.

Please vote yes to create a charter commission. Let's start an honest conversation about Plymouth's future on Saturday, May 15.

Thanks for listening.