

John
Stefanini
Council

October 13, 2023

Charter Review Committee
Memorial Building
Framingham, MA 01702

Dear Chair Blumer and Honorable Members:

Thank you for the invitation to testify before your Committee.

Six years ago Framingham followed the footsteps of 17 other recent towns and voted to reform, reconstitute, and reinvigorate our local government, to bring to it the pride that each of us feels for Framingham, by adopting a home rule charter, crafted from proven provisions from the most successful of cities in our Commonwealth. While the Charter has not solved all of our problems, it has provided a structure for transparent, ethical, accountable and participatory decision-making to address them.

The Charter has changed the tone and direction of Framingham for generations to come. Its promises to increase transparency, efficiency, participation and accountability as it has in other communities, have dominated much of our civic discourse over the past six years. The attached opinion piece by members of the Charter Commission from 2017 provides good benchmarks to evaluate the change in our form of government.

We have made great strides in many of these areas, such as increasing participation, bringing new voices into process, securing a seat at state and national “tables”, controlling expenses, and giving all of our students a voice in school policies. We have seen no change in services, yet our tax levy has increased by only a few percent over the past six years; our schools have greater focus on equity and student programming with the first southside chair in several decades; voter participation has quadrupled and hundreds of new volunteers have joined local boards; and we have seen a significant uptick in assistance from our state and federal partners.

For example, in my neighborhood, Coburnville, residents have organized an active neighborhood association. Voter participation has more than doubled, the number of appointed officials has nearly tripled, and we have a strong voice in municipal affairs. All resulting in a reduction in crime, implementation of traffic calming measures, opening of recreational amenities, and planning for future growth. All made possible by our Charter.

That said, the surge of new residents over the past decade requires our efforts to become more intentional and intense if we are to maintain our tightknit neighborhoods, vibrant community organizations, engaged civic affairs, and prosperous local businesses. Over the past decade much less than half the voters in the City were living here; and only one-third of residents were here 15 years ago.

And, as the recent election demonstrates, our fledgling city remains very much in flux as new folks become more engaged with high expectation owing to the previous cities where they resided.

Yet vestiges of our town culture continues, in a few areas, to thwart efforts to adopt best practices from other cities. Our municipal officials need to see transparency as intuitively bringing the Memorial Building to residents rather than merely better marketing of the City, to make traffic decisions “exclusively” by a citizen driven Traffic Commission as a means of harnessing their knowledge of our roadways, and to invest in the zoning and planning processes to “smartly” develop our land. This dominance of some of the functions of our government is owing to the people leading it, not the structure of it, and as such needs your encouragement to adopt best practices, not structural changes in the Charter itself.

And there are two areas that additional clarity in our Charter to guide our leaders would advance these goals:

The budget process. The budget process, as it is in our school department and in many municipalities, should be a fiscal blueprint developed in collaboration with all stakeholders. Outlining in our Charter benchmarks for a process that defines timing, content, participants, and community engagement will increase connection and trust between government and those appointed to lead it.

Strategic planning. Strategic planning should not be a decennial study that gathers dust on a shelf, but rather a philosophy for running government implemented routinely through policies, procedures, ordinances and budgets. It is a community-based exercise to meet the needs and wants of residents, not just a department head’s to do list. Outlining benchmarks for process that defines timing, content, participants, and community engagement will enhance our government’s timely response to the needs and wants of residents on an ongoing basis, not merely when it becomes a “squeaky wheel”.

After all, the things that make Framingham great -- our people, our institutions, our businesses, our neighborhoods -- are the things that matter, not our structure of government or a given municipal official. Our Charter needs to facilitate that collaborative work, to enable it students, taxpayers, residents and businesses to stand up and work together.

Thank you for your consideration. As always, I am available to answer any questions or assist as needed.

Sincerely,

John A. Stefanini
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Attachment

Imagine a better Framingham

Robert F. Kennedy often said in his fateful presidential campaign:

Some people see things as they are, and say 'Why?' -- I dream of things that never were, and say, 'Why not?'

Consider these words from the late Senator in the context of Framingham and ...

- ... **Imagine** a local government focused and organized around vibrant, active neighborhoods that select accountable leaders through a healthy and inclusive competitive election process;
- ... **Imagine** a community that engages all of its residents as it develops a strategic master plan for all of its boards, commissions, committees and residents with a plan to implement it;
- ... **Imagine** a place that requires every one of its leaders to publicly demonstrate that he or she meets the highest ethical standards, adhere to the strictest campaign-finance guidelines and prohibits self-dealing;
- ... **Imagine** our community with an accountable elected leader who advocates for us with state and federal officials, non-profits and businesses;
- ... **Imagine** a community that encourages and supports policies that support and nurture our neighborhood businesses;
- ... **Imagine** a local government that shares roles and responsibilities among leaders with strong checks and balances that ensure thoughtful, inclusive and balanced leadership on all of the important issues facing us as a community.
- ... **Imagine** easy, timely public access to all information, decisions and services without “knowing someone”;
- ... **Imagine** a government where school and municipal leaders and parents collaborate to improve our schools and better ensure quality education for our children; and,
- ... **Imagine** leaders maximizing citizen participation and selecting volunteers from every segment and area of our diverse community and using their talents to better the quality of the life of our community.

These aspirations to bring to our government the pride that each of us feels for Framingham is easy to imagine under the proposed home rule charter. The Charter will not solve all of our problems, but it will provide a structure for transparent, ethical, accountable and participatory decision-making to address them.

Today more than half our precincts do not have full representation at Town Meeting and all five Selectmen and the Moderator, who appoint all the Town's boards, live in just two of the 18 precincts. And while 60% of our students come from south of route 9, not one of our School Committee members does.

17 communities in Massachusetts have adopted a city form of government in the past 30 years – all smaller than Framingham – and Framingham, the 14th most populous community would become Massachusetts 54th community with a city form of government. This Charter is crafted from proven provisions from the most successful of these cities.

Framingham is a great community in which to live, learn, work and play, but don't let anyone tell you that we cannot do better – we can and will do better, much better.

The opponents of the Charter want you to believe their fears in order to preserve the status quo rather than seize this opportunity to reform, reconstitute and reinvigorate our local government. Please take a moment to read the Charter mailed to your house, ask questions, get the facts and vote.

It is time to reconstitute, reinvigorate and reenergize our local government. Please join us in voting YES on Tuesday, April 4 and together we will make Framingham an even better place.

Adam S. Blumer, Dennis W. Cardiff, Dennis L. Giombetti, George P. King, Janet E. Leombruno, Valerie Mulvey, Jason A. Smith, and John A. Stefanini