

MINUTES
UMATILLA COUNTY CHARTER REVIEW COMMITTEE
Meeting of June 6, 2018
5:30 p.m., Albee Room, Milton-Freewater Public Library
Milton-Freewater, Oregon

Committee Members Present: Chair Michele Grable; Vice-Chair Don Miller; Sally Anderson Hansell (arrived 5:45); Jerry Baker (arrived 6:05); Genna Banica; Dan Dorrn (via cell phone); Darla Huxel (arrived 5:50); Jennifer McClure Spurgeon

Absent: Mark Gomolski

County Counsel: Doug Olsen

Guests Present: Jim Barrow; Linda Hall; Jeannine Nally; Judy Witherrite; Ed Chesnut; Elizabeth Milatz; Suni Danforth; Charles E. Danforth; Wes Koklich; Heather Alarcon

CALL TO ORDER

The meeting began at 5:30 p.m.

1. Call to Order - The chair called the meeting to order at 5:30.
2. Minutes of Previous Minutes - The minutes had been emailed to the committee members. Mr. Miller moved to approve the minutes, seconded by Ms. McClure-Spurgeon. Carried 8-0.
3. Chair's Introductory Comments - Chair Grable welcomed those present to the meeting. This is the first meeting held outside of Pendleton. The purpose of the committee is to recommend to the Commissioners proposed changes to the Umatilla County Charter. The Committee has had a presentation from the Association of Oregon Counties providing an overview of the county structure. The Committee will look how the county structure is working or not working, and provide specific recommendation for amendments. Everyone is welcome to comment.
4. Additions to Agenda - None
5. Business Items:
 - A. Discussion with Jim Barrow. Jim Barrow, retired Umatilla County Administrative Services Director and Human Resources Director, was present to provide information and answer questions regarding the county structure of government. Mr. Barrow introduced himself and gave information on his background, including his history of 18 years with the county as Director of Human Resources and Director of Administrative Services. He had also provided reports to two previous charter review committees. He is a resident of Washington. He also served on the City of Walla Walla Council, including as Mayor. He has also worked with the Walla Walla County Board of Commissioners, which has a similar structure to Umatilla County.

One of the difficulties with the current Umatilla County Board structure was the problem created with Open Meetings law. With two Commissioners a quorum is present. This creates an impossible burden, and hinders discussion among board members, and also with staff and department heads.

An appointment of a county administrator would be beneficial. It would allow 1 person to dialogue and avoid public meeting requirements. It would not require a charter amendment to accomplish.

An overabundance of elected officials can create conflicts among the officials, and a more concentrated method for decision makers is better. This was a benefit to the Umatilla County Charter.

Mr. Barrow was asked if it would be beneficial to expand the number of board members. He did not really have an opinion. It might have practical problems with having more people to run and also more expensive. If have someone similar to a mayor, that can handle the day to day activities, and have the Board for other policy matters. If have centralized authority, you can handle activities better. If have more board members, can represent community better, and can be more accessible to people. A county administrative could handle the day to day chores, and have full time commissioners to represent the citizens.

A question was raised regarding the role of a commissioner - policy, administrative and advocacy - and which was the priority. The policy role was highest. The day to day activities are important too, allowing for department head to go to someone. The advocacy role for issues and external matters also was important, to have a voice at the local, state and federal levels. The downside was when the commissioner was out of the area on issues, constituents were not able to talk with a commissioner.

The Chair wanted to know his experience with the work load of commissioners. Mr. Barrow always had hardworking commissioners. It is a full time job, but the Commissioners were able to meet the needs. His experience in Washington was with part time elected officials, who had other employment.

An administrator would be beneficial, similar to a chief of staff, who can make sure the policy is faithfully executed. This person could handle the day to day matters, the smaller stuff, working with department heads. It was important to have the right person in the position. The commissioners would still have a full time job, and have time to set policy and for advocacy role. They would, though, be insulated from department heads.

Mr. Miller wanted to know if the advocacy role was functionally needed. Yes, definitely, since the county does not exist in a vacuum. It is easy to be ignored. Best if join with association, to have voice be heard.

Ms. Anderson raised the question of compensation of Commissioners. Mr. Barrow's experience was frustration in dealing with that issue, to make sure Commissioners and county employees were properly paid. He wanted to make sure salaries were adjusted to the market.

The possibility of election by zone was raised. His experience in Washington had election with mixed method, by zone and at large. It did not seem to create any problems with representing all citizens for the entire county. He was not personally against zones, but did not see great need for it.

He was not in favor of any minimum qualifications. It should be up to the voters to decide who to represent them. What would be the qualifications? The present system is working fairly well, and to place limits would be viewed as elitist. Term limits, though, in his personal opinion, do provide fresh viewpoints, but then lose experience and credibility. Ultimately, the ballot box should be the decider. He personally does not see the need for term limits. It takes a while to gain the experience to be able to make good decisions. Usually 6 months to one year just to get the basic knowledge.

A county administrator is a good idea. It would help with the open meetings problem, as Commissioners would have less need to talk with one another. It would not require a charter change. He did not see any real need for any changes to the charter, maybe some tweaking, but no major overhaul is needed. If not broken, no need to fix it.

- B. Discussion with Linda Hall. Linda Hall was introduced. She is the City Manager with the City of Milton-Freewater and has been employed with the City for 25 years. Working with the City, she is familiar with the City Council form of government. In her opinion, the city council structure was effective, it allowed for continuity, accountability and efficiency. The elected officials had more latitude to address the issues. As manager, there was no stand on political issues. Government should be run like a business. A professional manager was responsible to make sure things were addressed. The elected official set policy, and then the manager's job is to implement.

In her experience, the county structure did work well but could work better under a council/manager format. It takes time to learn and educate yourself on the issues. If the chair is rotated, the knowledge and continuity is lost. It takes usually two years to get familiar with parts of government and make competent decisions. A manager can help with continuity. There are checks and balances to make sure power is not concentrated too much. The City does not have difficulty in attracting good citizens to volunteer for council positions.

There are good working relationships with the county. Her opinion and experience are that a council/manager structure works more efficiently. It also makes it easier on employees and provides more continuity and stability. A council can set policy and longer term goals.

- C. Clinton Reeder Paper. Discussion postponed until meet in person with Mr. Reeder.

- D. Public Comments.

Wes Koklich talked about an administrator.

Charles Danforth also added to the discussion on an administrator and the need to give the authority to the administrator. The discussion continued on an administrator compared to a manger. Mr. Danforth noted that he wanted to elect anyone handling the money. Later he added that a commissioner should be working on advocacy and administration, not policy. The policy is set by the constitution. Mr. Danforth felt that the low voter turnout indicated voter satisfaction and that it is working. Mr. Barrow, disagreed; Based on his long term employment in government, he felt that the low voter turnout was a result of cynicism, not satisfaction.

Ed Chesnut commented that the City of Milton-Freewater did not have a problem in attracting interested citizens to be on the council. Any concerns about missing meetings are addressed and self-corrected. Citizens are willing to serve.

- E. Future presentations or interviews. Possible future meetings will include discussions with Senator Hansell and Clinton Reeder. Potential other sources will be from the Sherriff's Department and city groups.
- F. Next Meeting. The consensus was to schedule the next meeting in Pendleton, to allow for discussion with Clinton Reeder. The date for the next meeting is set for July 12, 2018, at 5:30, at the Umatilla County Courthouse in Pendleton.

The meeting was adjourned by the Chair at 7:21 p.m.

Respectfully submitted,

Douglas R. Olsen

Umatilla County Counsel