

The Proposed Newton Charter — Vote NO!
Fred Arnstein — Neighbors for a Better Newtonville

Democracy is up for a vote

Newton's has a city Charter, which is the equivalent of the United States' constitution. Our Charter is the framework for how the city is governed. We've had our Charter since 1972. Now a city commission has proposed a revised city charter, to be voted on by Newton Citizens in November. It will be an up-or-down vote, yes or no.

The revised charter would remove all local (ward) representation. That is why we are opposed to it. There are other points in the proposed charter that can be debated, but when it comes to eliminating ward-elected councilors, the answer is clear: NO. This is so fundamental an issue that it becomes imperative to reject the new proposed Charter.

How you are represented currently

Newton has eight wards. One Councilor specifically represents your ward. Your Ward Councilor is elected only by the residents of your ward. Ward Councilors are genuine local representatives.

Your ward also has two "at-large" members. They live in your ward but are elected by the whole city. The city's priorities are not always going to be the same as your ward's priorities.

In other words there are 24 City Councilors total. Eight of them speak specifically for each of the eight wards. The other sixteen are not accountable to any ward in particular.

The basic principle of having both local and at-large representation is exactly right. Some of our councilors represent local interests while others are more likely to take a larger view. Your local Ward Councilor is your protection against the tyranny of the majority, while our at-large Councilors protect against the possibility of infinite squabbling among local interests.

One can debate the overall size of the council (is 24 too big?) but the basic principle of local *and* at-large is exactly right.

Why this issue is so very important

Most of the time, we are not inclined to worry about whether or not there is ward representation. But things do not always run smoothly in the realm of politics. Very serious differences can emerge, as we see in the country as a whole right now. In Newton there are currently serious differences too: anti-development forces in some wards are disputing with other sectors of the city over the need for large dense developments. Local representation is not one sided: it guarantees that anti-development areas will have their say and equally so for pro-development areas. Local representation does not play favorites; it only guarantees that each area will have influence. It is good no matter what your interests or point of view.

The New Proposed Charter

The Charter Commission's proposal would reduce the council size 12 members. Four of them could reside anywhere in the city; the other eight would each have to reside in their own ward. But the main thing is this: *all the councilors would be elected at-large*. Your "Ward Councilor" would not actually represent your ward; he or she would just live there. Effectively, all local representation would be eliminated.

Local representation is vital

Majority rule is good, but minorities must be able to push back against the majority. Depending on circumstances, farming states or industrial states might be in the minority. Small towns or Cities. Northerners or Southerners. To make sure that minorities are not totally overwhelmed by a differently-minded majority, we have a system where localities – every State in the Union, every district in the state – has a local voice, a local representative.

Imagine the contrary: imagine if suddenly the U.S. constitution changed so that our two state senators had to be elected at-large by all the people in the United States. Absurd and outrageous, right? We value our local voice, as well we should. We need the right to have our own voice heard, just as we grant the same right to people who might be very unlike us to have theirs heard as well.

At-large voting favors the rich and well-connected

It currently costs about \$30,000 to run for an at-large council seat. That's how much Jake Auchincloss, the new Ward 2 at-large councilor, spent in 2015 to get elected, and it's about what this year's candidate, Braden Houston, figures to spend.

That's for an at-large campaign. But you can run for council for much less if you run as a Ward Councilor. You have only one-eighth the number of people to contact. The proposed system, all at-large, favors the rich and well-connected.

That's what is happening right now in Lowell Massachusetts, where a civil rights group is suing the City of Lowell, alleging that its electoral system has led to a stark lack of minority representation in city government, and a consequent disparity in city services to the different neighborhoods.

"Lowell has no ward-based seats...As a result, representatives from neighborhoods with high turnout, most notably the city's Belvidere section, which is far whiter and wealthier than the city as a whole, tend to dominate city government. Currently, six of the city's nine city councilors live in Belvidere.

Lowell has grown increasingly diverse over the past few decades...today, the city is 51 percent white. Despite fielding a number of candidates in city elections in recent elections, members of the Asian and other minority communities have won seats [only twice] over the past 20 years. There are currently no minority elected officials in Lowell...

*Ted Siefer: Lawsuit challenges Lowell at-large voting.
<https://commonwealthmagazine.org/politics/lawsuit-challenges-lowell-at-large-voting/>*

Who will provide local service

Ward Councilors are often the primary point of contact for citizens who need help with city and neighborhood issues. While at-large councilors can also be very responsive to local concerns, they are not bound to be so. They are not very dependent on the ward vote. Under the proposed charter changes, all city councilors will run citywide and will therefore no longer be accountable to their neighborhood in particular.

If it ain't broke, don't fix it

Is there some dreadful problem that will be solved by eliminating ward representation? No, there isn't. Newton happens to be ranked very highly as a great place to live in various national rankings. In fact, according to the Wall Street Journal (WSJ), it ranks #1 of all cities in the United States over 65,000 people. (We have about 85,000 residents.)

What of other "best" cities? Do they have local (ward) representation? We studied the WSJ's full list of 50 best U.S. cities. (We removed Newton because we're looking at the comparison between us and the other best cities. In addition, six other cities were not comparable because they had much larger populations than Newton.) *Of the 43 comparable Best Cities, 60 percent have local/ward representation.*

In other words, there's nothing wrong with local representation. On the contrary, local representation, among the best cities, is the norm. Why eliminate so fundamental a safeguard as local representation, when there's no problem to be solved?

The "Yes" side's arguments

The "Yes" side has its arguments. Here they are and here's why they don't hold water. These "Yes" arguments are taken from the Charter Commission itself, plus an op-ed piece by John Sisson in the Newton Tab of March 22 and another op-ed piece by Jennifer Abbott, Frieda Dweck, and Andrea Steenstrup in the Newton Voice of March 21.

1. An all-at-large council would be more democratic because it would make all city councilors accountable to all voters.

According to this argument, every elected official should be elected by everybody. There is no truly local representation. We would never accept this at the national or state levels. Except for towns with great homogeneity among the residents, local representation is just as needed at the municipal level.

2. Voters have more influence over the actions of the council when they can vote for all councilors.

On the contrary, you have more influence over somebody who is directly accountable to a smaller and more cohesive group (their ward) than to a large and diverse group (the whole city).

3. An all-at-large council would help modernize our governmental systems and make our government more efficient.

We're all for efficiency except when it interferes with democracy. Dictators love efficiency: they want to bring all their schemes to fruition quickly and without opposition. Democracy is messy but that's the price we pay for something that in fact is priceless.

4. The commission devoted a huge amount of time to studying the issue and finding out what was best, so their conclusions must be correct.

Apparently they were not good students. We are grading the commission based on the outcome they arrived at, not the number of hours they spent and the number of people they talked to.

5. An all-at-large council would preserve the sense of one city.

We are one city in some ways, but we are fragmented in other ways. The issues that divide us have to be treated seriously and with input from various sides. Ward-elected councilors are an essential part of the mix.

6. Ward-elected councilors have incentive to put parochial problems before citywide concerns. In cities with a majority of ward-elected councilors, the ward councilors can vote as a bloc or trade votes.

It's true that a ward system can become corrupted. But it's equally true that an at-large system can be corrupted, though in a different way, as we see in the Lowell example (above). Having both types of councilors — both at-large and local — creates a balance and actually lessens the chance of corruption on either side.

Conclusion

We urge you to keep your local voice in this city. Whatever your interests may be, you are entitled to a local representative to voice them. *Come November, vote NO on the proposed new Charter.*