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**Notes from editor (not for publication):**



HEADLINE ELEMENTS:

####BEGIN HED####

1 Brattleboro panel look to reconcile contradictory will of  
2 town voters

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3 Charter Revision Commission races to craft a unified  
4 proposal before state Legislature steps in

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5 TEXT BODY:

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6 Brattleboro’s Charter Revision Commission reconvened  
7 May 14 for the first time since August to try to make sense of the  
8 thorny question left by the March 3 election, when voters  
9 approved two ballot measures pointing in different directions.

10 One measure eliminated the town’s Representative Town  
11 Meeting (RTM) in favor of an Open Town Meeting, where any  
12 registered voter may attend and participate.

13 The other called for replacing the RTM with an  
14 Australian ballot system, in which residents vote on budgetary  
15 questions by secret ballot rather than by a show of hands in a  
16 meeting hall.

17 Both passed, but both, taken together, may be impossible  
18 to fully satisfy at once. And yet, if the town officials and voters  
19 don’t agree upon a proposal in relatively short order, the  
20 Legislature will likely decide for them.

21 “We’re either going to get nothing out of the Legislature,  
22 or we’re going to get something that we might not like,” said  
23 Commission Chair Kate O’Connor at group’s May 14 meeting.  
24 “So I think it’s really incumbent upon us, as a Charter Revision  
25 Commission, at the very least, to take this meeting and the next  
26 meeting to really look into what the possibilities are of doing  
27 both.”

28 O’Connor said she didn’t want “to throw up my hands at  
29 this meeting and say, ‘There is no way,’ because I think we owe it  
30 to our community members, because this is long-term.”

31 “But I want it to be in our hands and not people in  
32 Montpelier who know nothing about us,” she said. “They aren’t  
33 going to be the ones doing what they decide that we’re going to  
34 do. They could very well decide something for us that we don’t  
35 like.”

## 36 What it means

37 Initially, the Commission had been prepared to send its  
38 own set of charter changes to a special election but paused its  
39 work after two citizens’ petitions — one for an Australian ballot  
40 system and another for an open Town Meeting (OTM) system —  
41 were placed on the ballot.

42 Voters passed both petitions, deciding to discontinue the  
43 RTM in favor of both OTM and an Australian ballot.

44 The approved changes are now with the state Legislature  
45 but will not be addressed this year due to timing. The  
46 Commission is now tasked with reconciling these dual and  
47 potentially conflicting voter mandates with its three years of  
48 charter revision work and providing clear direction to state  
49 lawmakers.

50 Speakers advocated for a hybrid model that would  
51 preserve open deliberation while giving all residents — not just  
52 those who can attend a weeknight meeting — a budget vote.

53 Some say that data showing that between 377 and 512  
54 people voted “yes” on both initiatives indicates support for a  
55 combined approach, but commissioners remain split on what the  
56 results actually require them to do.

57 Some members believe the Commission’s existing charter  
58 draft — three years in the making — already addresses the  
59 situation, pointing to a provision allowing a petition signed by  
60 5% of voters to trigger a town-wide ballot on any meeting  
61 decision.

62 Others say that mechanism would be insufficient and  
63 that a second vote should happen automatically whenever  
64 financial questions are decided.

65 “We were thorough in our work that led up to what is  
66 currently in our set of recommendations,” said Commissioner and  
67 former Town Manager Peter Elwell, calling the current task “an  
68 awkward spot that we need to reconcile.”

69 “I feel like we need to work harder at seeing how the two  
70 might work together,” he said. “But consider the things we need  
71 to consider about both the logistics and what’s good for our local  
72 democracy. And if that lands us in a place where we think there  
73 is a better system or at least a system that more thoroughly  
74 integrates these two different methods as opposed to what we’ve  
75 already done, I totally agree.”

76 He called the content of the proposed charter “more  
77 empowering for Australian ballot proponents than what our  
78 system has had in town government up until now, but it’s got the

79 big missing piece of the budget, which was really the focus of a  
80 lot of the discussion around the election.”

81           Calling the underlying 1,216 to 1,157 vote to  
82 discontinue RTM “very close,” Elwell went on to say “for open  
83 Town Meeting and for Australian ballot, I think it’s reasonable for  
84 us to consider how the two things work together. But I don’t think  
85 it would be appropriate for us to just reflect on the volume and  
86 depth of our previous consideration and land there without  
87 exploring some of these other options.”

88           Commissioner Hannah Clarisse respectfully disagreed,  
89 while adding she understands and appreciates “the desire to try  
90 and look at how we can make everything happen.”

91           “But we can’t make everything happen. And we’ve put a  
92 lot of time and work into this,” Clarisse said, adding that she is  
93 “really happy with the document we have.”

94           “I think our goal is to come up with something that’s  
95 functional for the town, not something that’s going to make every  
96 single person happy,” she said. “And I think that we’ve done  
97 that.”

## 98           **Panel eyes three options**

99           The Commission is now weighing three structural  
100 options:

- 101           • An open Town Meeting followed automatically by a  
102 town-wide ballot on all financial questions.
- 103           • The same sequence but trigger the ballot vote only  
104 under defined conditions, such as a narrow margin or a citizen  
105 petition.
- 106           • The third — and most logistically ambitious — would  
107 reverse the order entirely: Hold an informational session in mid-  
108 January and then put all budget questions to Australian ballot on  
109 the first Tuesday in March.

110           The third option faces significant obstacles, including  
111 that the budget process would have to be completed by

112 December and that any change to the state-mandated March  
113 meeting date would require legislative approval.

114 Town Clerk Hilary Francis laid out the financial stakes  
115 plainly, pointing out that an open Town Meeting costs roughly  
116 \$7,000. A full Australian ballot election runs from \$20,000 to  
117 \$21,000 and requires six weeks lead time.

118 A hybrid model combining both would effectively create  
119 two separate election cycles, driving costs upward and  
120 potentially conflicting with the August primary calendar.

121 Francis said her office already logs about 1,700 hours per  
122 year on elections and would likely need additional staff to absorb  
123 another mandatory vote.

124 Commissioners floated cost-cutting measures, including  
125 relying primarily on mail-in ballots and using hand-counting for  
126 simple single-question ballots, with the Town Clerk's office  
127 serving as the only in-person polling location.

128 Beyond the governance structure, the Commission also  
129 discussed other pending charter changes: the role of the finance  
130 committee following the dissolution of the Representative Town  
131 Meeting; reducing the Human Services Committee from 11  
132 members to nine; and updating language in the charter's finance  
133 section to reflect any new meeting timelines.

134 A recurring concern throughout the session was the  
135 possibility that delay or internal disagreement could remove the  
136 decision from local hands altogether.

137 If the Commission cannot produce a unified proposal for  
138 voters to consider in November, state legislators may end up  
139 deciding how Brattleboro governs itself.

140 Elwell and O'Connor will now draft a framework of  
141 scenarios with pros and cons for each option to present at the  
142 next commission meeting on Thursday, May 28.

143 A public education campaign will be needed before any  
144 charter proposal goes to voters, commissioners agree. They've set  
145 May or June as a target for completing their work in view of a  
146 potential Nov. 4 ballot question.

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