

# Beacon Committee Suggests Charter Changes

By Jeff Simms on April 3, 2017 · 1 Comment

*Voters would decide on longer terms, health insurance*

By Jeff Simms

A citizen committee has recommended that the terms for the Beacon City Council's two at-large members be extended from two to four years and that all six members and the mayor lose the option of paid health insurance — earning an increased stipend instead.

The recommendations by the nine-member committee, appointed last year by Mayor Randy Casale, would require changing the city charter. The committee also suggested a number of changes to the language of the charter, but the term extensions and health-care changes would need voter approval.

Beacon has four wards, each of which is represented by a council member, plus the at-large members. All members are elected to two-year terms, and each seat is contested at the same time. The mayor serves four years.

Four-year terms for the at-large members would encourage longer-term planning, the committee wrote, while the ward-based seats would continue to be contested more frequently, allowing the council to remain closely attuned to neighborhood concerns. Any changes to the at-large terms would go into effect after the 2019 election.

## The Beacon Charter

In 1910 voters, by a 2 to 1 majority, approved a plan to merge Fishkill Landing and Matteawan, along with a portion of the hamlet of Glenham, into a new city called Beacon, named for the signal fires on Beacon Mountain that warned Gen. George Washington across the Hudson in Newburgh during the Revolutionary war of the approach of British forces.

Officials of the new city hoped to make its politics less partisan and so proposed to the state legislature they be allowed to adopt a "commission" form of government modeled on a charter adopted in 1909 by Grand Junction, Colorado.

Among other provisions, the charter created a city council with five members presided over by a mayor. In 1915 the charter was revised to allow the city to levy a property tax. The present charter, adopted in 1989, created a two-year term for council members and made the mayor the city's chief executive.

The city has offered health insurance to council members, who work part-time, since at least 1988, but the provision was only added to the charter last year.

According to Gerald Benjamin, associate vice president for regional engagement of the SUNY-New Paltz Benjamin Center, who advised the committee, the city currently pays \$47,000 annually to insure the three council members who opt for coverage. The increased stipends — \$2,000 for each council member, as well as a \$5,000 raise for the mayor (who now earns \$25,000) — would cost the city \$17,000.

Council members currently earn \$9,000 annually. If the health coverage provision is removed from the charter, they (and the mayor) would be permitted to buy insurance through the city plan. While many municipalities offer insurance to elected officials,

Benjamin said he knew of no other in New York that includes the provision as part of its charter.

The majority of the committee members believe that the city should not provide such benefits to part-time elected officials, Benjamin said, adding that doing so has “created some skepticism among members of the community.”

“The value of these benefits exceeds the salary for council members,” the committee wrote. “Members who accept these benefits are therefore effectively compensated at a much higher rate than are colleagues who do not, creating an inequity.”

Because of rising costs, paying for health insurance for elected officials is a concern across the state, Benjamin said.



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