

**Personnel Subcommittee Report on W.A. 30
Adoption of a new General By-Law pertaining to the establishment of
a Brookline Community Engagement Plan**

The Personnel Subcommittee of the Advisory Committee held a public hearing on September 26, 2019 at 7:30 p.m. to consider Warrant Article 30: Adoption of a new General By-Law pertaining to the establishment of a Brookline Community Engagement Plan. In attendance were subcommittee members Janet Gelbart, Chuck Swartz, and Christine Westphal; petitioners Deborah Brown (TMM 1), Mariah Nobrega (AC, TMM 4, CDICR), and Sam Botsford; Chief Diversity Officer Lloyd Gellineau; and Eddie Bates (Planning Department)

Background

Petitioners seek to amend the General By-Laws by creating a new article to establish a Community Engagement Plan (CEP) as a complement to Article 3.21 (Readily Accessible Electronic Meeting Notices) and 3.22 (the Public's right to be Heard on Warrant Articles). At minimum, a CEP, developed and monitored by ODICR, would increase public involvement in policy-making and more effectively respond to the needs and priorities of the wider community, especially groups that have not been engaged in the past. Such engagement, properly resourced, would increase public support and provide more government accountability and transparency.

Discussion

Basically, a CEP would provide Town government with a template to solicit input, keep participants engaged, and publicize decisions and the rationale behind them. Many communities have instituted such plans, and the MAPC can provide a framework so the Town is not recreating the wheel. The proposed by-law includes provisions for measuring effective outreach and evaluating and updating the plan annually.

Petitioners are concerned about the growing lack of trust in government because of lack of timely and widespread publication of information. Many examples were cited by both the petitioners and members of the subcommittee, including the current backlash against the marijuana dispensary on Beacon Street and the e-scooter pilot. A CEP would provide guidance on best practice for effective community outreach. It needs to encompass not just Town staff, but also elected officials, boards, committees, and commissions.

There are many blockades to increased participation, and it is difficult to find out what is going on unless you are already involved. The Town pays a cost in lost efficiency and reduced compliance. There needs to be a way that the Town pushes information out to the community, instead of requiring the public to ferret it out for themselves.

Chief Diversity Officer Lloyd Gellineau indicated that he will be requesting an additional position in the FY 21 budget process. A CEP could easily be part of the

duties assigned to a new position. Without additional staffing, all of the work of the ODICR -- which currently consists of the Director, two staff, and two interns - - will proceed more slowly. He also stated that community engagement is essential to the work of his department and a formalized CEP would make their task easier. It would begin with an assessment of what people want to know and where they go to find things out.

A subcommittee member questioned why it was necessary to establish a CEP in the Town's by-laws. Petitioners feel that community engagement is a core function of government and that the proposed article builds on the outreach already codified in Articles 3.21 and 3.22.

The subcommittee referred to the presentation by the Brookline Fiscal Advisory Committee to the Advisory Committee on September 17, specifically for the need to review new mandates in the context of the Town's total obligations and to prioritize accordingly. A subcommittee member expressed concern that a CEP could become very expensive very quickly. If the warrant article is passed and not appropriately resourced, it will be meaningless, but the resources are just not there now.

While the petitioners expressed their opinion that the implementation of a Community Engagement Plan would not result in much additional expense, the article as presented would require each Town Department to report on their community engagement activities, and requires those reports to be considered in the Department Managers' annual reviews. The subcommittee member thought that that reporting requirement could take up a significant amount of time in each department.

A planning department employee who attended the hearing indicated he had lived in New Bedford when that community implemented a CEP, and that it was well worth the effort in terms of development. A majority of the subcommittee agreed that the effort must be made.

Recommendation

By a vote of 2-1-0, the subcommittee recommends favorable action on WA 30.