



BLUE RIBBON COMMISSION

Report

Wednesday, March 27, 2019

Present: Co-Chair Claudia Dumond-Henderson, Co-Chair James Simons, Karen Carroll Bennett, Carolyn Gabbay, Doug Cornelius, Sue Flicop, Greg Reibman, Andrea Steenstrup, John Stewart and Committee Clerk, Danielle Delaney

Absent: Timothy Moran, Kathy Sun, Donald Siegel and Karen Carroll Bennett

Also Present: Councilor Baker

Co-Chair Dumond Henderson opened the discussion to members of the public who were present. She stated that the Commission was established in order to review the compensation of Newton's elected officials (the mayor and members of the city council and the school committee) and make recommendations for possible future changes to their salaries and benefits, is collecting public comment from members of the community.

Councilor Baker, Ward Councilor for Ward 7 said he has served 35 years. As the senior member of the Council he provides historical perspective. He added he wrestled with some of the questions included in the questionnaire. Question that he found difficult was would the compensation make a difference to his running? It hasn't and he does not think it would be different. He thinks that part of the opportunity he had, for most of his professional life, was a Professor at Suffolk University Law School, which has a tradition of encouraging public service by members of the faculty. In simple things like scheduling, he has been fortunate to have a complementary professional life to serve on City Council. He has taught in the field of Land Use and Environmental Law that City Councilor's deal with. He has written several articles and helped to save the Commonwealth Golf Course. There is now a public golf course that can make some money for the city. He has been fortunate that his public and private life have been relatively complimentary. There is a cost of some sort, whether it is time with families, time with their professional development. He thinks it important that the salary structure be such that it encourages wide participation. The Boston City Council does not vote on Land Use decisions; that is done by Boston Redevelopment Authority and the Mayor influences a lot of what happens in Boston Land Use. City Council votes, not only on the zoning ordinances which set the policy for Land Use, also permit granting authority which means that decisions that are made on individual projects. For the foreseeable future, there is a lot of responsibilities in addition to these fiscal responsibilities. Councilor Baker was President of the Council when the last Blue Ribbon Commission was appointed as he appointed it to undertake the review with the result the Mayor's salary should be increased and the City Council was going to be basically one-tenth of that. The Mayor's increase passed but not the City Council increase. He feels it is an institutional mistake and there is value in having a compensation set at a level that

reflects the amount of effort and work for the role as well as the potential opportunity cost that some citizens must have for taking an office.

Councilor Baker does think the School Committee should be compensated.

Carolyn Gabbay asked if the City Council stipend piece is about \$9900? In response, \$9750. The Mayor presently is at \$125,000. If 10% were the benchmark, it would take it up to \$12,500. In the historical sense, Councilor Baker said the Mayor's should go up because of inflation and the nature of the role.

Question: Does the health insurance available add to the level of compensation? Are some people taking advantage and others do not? Councilor Baker has not taken advantage of it as he has had it from the university. He has not heard of running for City Council for health benefits. The original legislation setting up salaries for Aldermen and School Committee passed in 1973 or 1974. When first elected in 1975 Councilor Baker said there was a salary about \$5,000 and just one increase between 1975 and some time in the 80's.

Question: Was the Land Use function discussed in the last Charter Commission? There is one provision that the Charter Commission did recommend that the Council will likely accept and there will be some opportunity for some expenses of Councilors. Sometimes there is a fund for the Mass Municipal Association. It was not in the proposed charter because it was thought too prescribed so they were focused on the structure and the City Council would then have to determine how the work process should be. City Councilors felt that should not be part of the City Charter but that was more for the City Council to work at depending on what size they ended up with.

Question: Should there be provision for some additional compensation for the President of the Council and Committee Chairs? In response, Councilor Baker said no. He has served as President and as a Committee Chair. Those are functions that should be viewed as the reward for work. Institutionally Chairs have been selected because of their interest and willingness to work, not because there is extra compensation. Councilor Baker is not in favor of any kind of change in compensation because of the rule. President Emeritus performs such duties as the President shall direct and otherwise presides when the President or Vice President are unavailable to serve. There was a question regarding the duties of committee work? Councilor Baker said the chairs wrote all their own reports. One advance is that the Clerk's office has taken over the function of writing the reports and reviewed by the Chair and there is staff assistance. The Chairs spend time outside meetings working on how things will be done. Discussion of the hours spent by council members on meetings, etc. was approximately four to six meetings a month. Neighborhood meetings probably two or three nights a week on various activities. There could be a total of ten hours a week or maybe more. John Stewart said he had put in enormous hours on prior Council work. Councilor Baker said the Golf Course Project involved many, many hours of work; approximately 1500 or 2000 hours on legal research, background work, etc. John Stewart asked about providing some additional compensation for the President of the Council and Committee Chairs? In response Councilor Baker said no as he felt those are

functions that should be viewed as the reward for work is more work. The Council is a very different body than the State Legislature. Every Councilor's vote is the same.

The last time Councilor Baker had an opponent was 2003. It was noted that health care benefits are significant, but the pension benefits are just a proportion of their salary and generally less than social security.

Question: Is the city self-insured? It was suggested that someone from Human Resources come to a meeting to discuss these questions.

Doug Cornelius provided the following facts at tonight's meeting. He stated that as of this morning, there were 264 responses to the survey. 188 were made on Monday March 18, the first day the survey was publicized. Since that first day, there have been fewer than 20 responses each day.

Villages:

- Newton Centre 19%
- West Newton 16%
- Newtonville 12%
- Thompsonville 1%

Names: 185 people left their names (70%)

86% thought school committee and councilors should have a salary.

62% thought there should be a cost of living adjustment each term for councilors/school committee and 69% thought so for the mayor.

37% thought minimum wage should be a factor for considering the salaries.

35% of the respondents have considered running for office. Only 29% considered the compensation a factor in the willingness to run.

There was no clear answer on whether the compensation has an impact on Newton's ability to attract a socio-economic diverse pool of candidates. The responses are split close to 50/50.

We received 137 general comments so far, on file. There are many comments about the size of the council and an overly-generous pension. Neither of which are within the Blue Ribbon Commissions mandate. In closing, Mr. Cornelius stated that we are still receiving a few comments each day.

The next meeting of the Commission is scheduled for April 9, 2019 in City Hall.

The Commission adjourned at 9:10 p.m.

Respectfully submitted,

Claudia Dumond-Henderson, Co-Chair
James Simons, Co-Chair