



City of Cambridge

IN CITY COUNCIL

October 31, 2016

**NEIGHBORHOOD & LONG TERM PLANNING,
PUBLIC FACILITIES, ARTS & CELEBRATION**

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Mayor E. Denise Simmons

The Neighborhood and Long Term Planning, Public Facilities, Arts and Celebrations Committee and the Civic Unity Committee held a joint public hearing on August 25, 2016 beginning at 6:00 p.m. in the Sullivan Chamber to discuss improving voter turnout for the municipal elections in Cambridge through voter reward options and will focus on receiving feedback from the community.

Present at the hearing were Councillor Nadeem Mazen, Chair, Neighborhood and Long Term Planning, Public Facilities, Arts and Celebrations Committee, Councillor Dennis Carlone, Vice Mayor Marc McGovern, Chair of the Civic Unity Committee, Mayor E. Denise Simmons, Councillor Jan Devereux, Tanya Ford, Executive Director, Lesley Waxman, Assistant Director, Ethridge A. King, Charles Marquardt, Election Commissioners, Election Commission, Arthur Goldberg, Deputy City Solicitor, Dan Schwartz, Aide to Councillor Mazen, and Deputy City Clerk Paula M. Crane.

Also present were Robert Winters, Joanna Herlihy, Carl Rothenhaus, P.F. Soto, Julia Carlson, Caroline Mac, Romain Waith, Michael Nitch, and John Hawkinson.

Councillor Mazen convened the hearing and gave an overview of the agenda for the meeting (Attachment A) and supplied the attendees with a written presentation regarding incentivizing voting in Cambridge Municipal Elections (Attachment B). He stated that a Public Comment period will be added to the beginning of the hearing for those who want to speak but are unable to stay until the end of the hearing.

Robert Winters, 366 Broadway, stated that everyone would like to see higher turnout in elections but noted that it is a national trend of people being disengaged in elections. He stated that the bigger issue is the unevenness of the voting, not the turnout. He said that the issue of rent control did lead to a tremendous amount of turnout. He said that voter turnout in Cambridge is still higher than neighboring cities and towns and that it should be incumbent on the candidates to provide sufficient appeal to voters to make them want to vote. He said that if candidates fail to do so, that is the problem. He said that

replacing interest with cash is not a wise idea. He said that in some sense, not voting is a vote, saying that an individual chooses not to participate.

Joanna Herlihy, 410 Norfolk Street, gave an overview of her prepared comments (Attachment C). She stated that rewards for voting is an extreme idea. She said that the Participatory Budgeting Project could have been used to build responsibility in an engaged citizenry if structured differently. She said that this process has depended on the work of City staff and hired specialists, engaging resident volunteers in an ephemeral structure not connected with permanent activities in the City or the usual process for voting for elected officials. She said that it seems a waste to attract Cambridge residents to such an activity but not retain their connection to City affairs.

Councillor Mazen talked about a need for greater voter participation without necessarily knowing how to get there. He stated that over the past several months he has received a lot of feedback. He stated that he would like to reframe the discussion to begin a longer-term discussion. He stated that this is about the data around paying people to vote but it is not about voter engagement. He said that it is about the idea of democracy and that our representative democracy is sacred. He said that for it to be functional, it also has to be inclusive irrespective of race, gender, occupation or socioeconomic background. He said that we are not talking about voter apathy. He explained that he is not trying to talk about getting people excited about voting. He said that socioeconomic status shows in voter turnout and you can see that certain people are not represented and are not voting. He stated that there is a trend that the disenfranchised communities are not voting which is a vicious cycle and perpetuates certain groups not getting attention nor having a voice at the civic table. He stated that in today's process, there are obviously concerns if you are working hourly vs. salary, large family vs. no family, access to daycare, etc. and this is what affects the numbers on voter turnout.

Councillor Mazen gave an overview of his presentation. He said that it is important to understand where we come into the mix. He said that statistics on participation definitely correlate to income. He said that it is important to talk about the Gold Standard for participation. He stated that the proposal in Oregon is a creative beginning and not be the end all of what should be done. He said that there is research around democracy vouchers and a democracy lottery. He said that democracy vouchers have been shown a 25% voter increase which would mean 700 extra voters in Cambridge. He said that democracy lotteries have had some success and were run by private non-profits that were offering a bounty wherein people could win dollars by random selection of those who voted. He said that the publicity around potential reward improves turnout for the current election cycle and keeps voting in the mind of citizens for future elections as well. He commented that objections to the idea are real as some say it is a civic duty and we have not emphasized this duty in schools or public discussions. He noted that even with jury duty, you can receive a per diem offset. Councillor Mazen said that one claim is that early voting will solve the problem but studies say that it can actually decrease turnout. He said that it works when partnering with other systems. He stated that in the current system, the voter base may follow a given issue, but that candidates don't reach out equally to encourage general voter participation. He stated that a candidate in a neighborhood will almost certainly stir up greater participation amongst their social base and those of a similar socioeconomic status, and through the people proximal to them in the neighborhood. They will also stir up their issue base. He said that we cannot rely on candidates to have blanket coverage of potential voters and therefore cannot achieve social equity nor equal participation by relying on candidate-driven outreach. He explained that while some say this is too expensive, he is willing to spend large amounts of money to do something right and it is valuable to enshrine democracy at this level. He explained that these incentives could get us to a marginal increase in voter turnout. He stated that, even so, there are no solutions, only questions. He said that he wants to work collaboratively but there is needs to be a plan as a community to address the trend of decades in decrease in participation. He thanked people on the voter engagement advocacy group who did the research for this important topic.

Vice Mayor McGovern stated that Mr. Winters makes a valid point as it relates to the decrease in voter turnout after rent control ended. He said that this rent control was a defining issue with clear sides. He said that since then, everyone is struggling to find the issue that will grab people. He said that while there are many important things happening in the City, there is no decisive issue that drives voter turnout. He said that as it relates to candidate engagement with voters, there is some validity to that thought. He said that candidates look at people who vote in prior elections. He said that candidates are responsible in some ways because they disenfranchise people who they do not contact. He stated that it is the responsibility of the City Council to reach out to newcomers to the City to explain why municipal government is important. He stated that before moving forward, it is imperative to hear from the people who are not voting in Cambridge. In terms of the incentives, he commented that if a person does not feel civically engaged or represented, offering something via incentive may make sense. He said that there are examples where incentives have worked in other areas. He stated his hope that the conversation gets broader. He said that an educational campaign about why municipal government matters could be beneficial.

Councillor Devereux said that if we really want to think outside the box we should talk about changing the municipal cycle to coordinate with even-year large cycle elections. She spoke about the idea of making municipal elections every four years. She said that the City has the means to do this without having to pay people. She added that consideration of a ward system or at-large system may help. Councillor Devereux stated that At-large representation and Proportional Representation both work to exclude some people out of necessity. She stated that maybe a ward system would work better to get people engaged in neighborhood issues. She asked if there are any voting locations at any of the public housing developments to make it easier for low-income residents or people with job or childcare issues. She emphasized that different polling locations would allow low-income residents to be more reachable. She said that she does not have a great understanding of lotteries and asked if it is possible to create a prize that said if Cambridge reaches a 25% turnout in the next municipal election, the City can do something special by giving something back to the residents. She said that this may motivate people to become more involved.

Councillor Carlone stated that he was looking forward to hearing from the experts. He said that the lottery idea is great when someone who truly needs the money wins it. He said that he agrees with Councillor Devereux about the cycle of elections as well as the longer time period between elections. Councillor Mazen added that former City Councillors, current City Councillors and the public had talked about the idea of a longer term.

Mayor Simmons stated that this is a novel idea and an important discussion to talk about increased participation in civic duty as it is a privilege. She said that her mother came to Massachusetts because she wanted the freedom to vote. She said that her mother instilled in her children the importance of voting. Mayor Simmons said that voter turnout is lower than 20 years ago. She asks if we have endeavored to find a way to ask the people that don't vote why they do not vote. She said that it is difficult to fix a problem if you don't know why the problem exists. She noted that campus politics is that students often vote absentee ballot in their home town. She stated that while she is certainly interested in finding out ways to get more people to vote, if there are financial rewards the question becomes how long that can last. She explained that it is important to be careful because there may be unintended consequences. She said that the City must do its' best thinking about what ways to find out why the non-voter is not voting. She added that group voting in families is a great incentive.

Councillor Mazen stated that he loves the idea of polling and researching why people are not voting. He said that he loves the image of an early voting dinner parade. He thanked his colleagues for their thoughts. He asked the Election Commission for any ideas that they could share that could increase turnout.

Vice Mayor McGovern asked how municipal elections are publicized. He questioned if there are other ways to get the word out to Cambridge residents. Vice Mayor McGovern said that he often hears that people don't understand the Proportional Representation form of government. He noted the need to better explain how this form of government works. He said that there are a lot of things that can be done that do not go as far as monetary incentives, etc. He asked the Election Commission representatives if they have any ideas about what can be done to better inform the public.

Tanya Ford said that she did not prepare any such recommendations or responses because the hearing notification stated that topic of the hearing would be to receive feedback from the community regarding improving voter turnout. Mayor Simmons said that the Committee should keep to the Call of the Meeting. Councillor Mazen stated that the purpose of the hearing was to generate a creative discussion.

John Hawkinson, 84 Mass Avenue, stated that it seems the scope of the hearing is really promoting voter turnout, which is a larger question than rewarding voters. He stated that he wonders what the role that the City (administratively) or the Election Commission has in promoting turnout. He asked what fraction of their budget, if any, is devoted to promoting the turnout. He stated that he would like to have a better understanding of whose job it is to market elections. He said that if the Election Commission views it as not their responsibility it means a different thing than if they spend \$10,000 per year on it. He stated his hope that the Election Commission will address this issue. He stated that he wonders about how voter turnout in Cambridge varies with transit-oriented development. In response to a comment from Mayor Simmons, he said that it is not right to throw up the numbers for MIT versus the rest of the City as they are not directly comparable.

Councillor Devereux asked if there is a separate order about publishing a voter guide. Councillor Mazen responded that this was the second part of the conversation of the Roundtable with the Election Commission that has been postponed.

Councillor Mazen opened public comment.

P.F. Soto said she agrees with Mr. Winters. She said that her feelings are stronger than his. She stated that she takes exception to people talking as if they know that everyone agrees with them. She stated that this is not a participatory democracy. She stated that she is an election boycotter because she is not represented and most people are waking up to that fact. She said that the people she talks to say that low voter turnout is contributed to what is going on nationally and the ability to use the internet. She said that people are becoming more educated. She stated that all politics are not local and she sees a trickle-down effect from Washington to all cities and towns. She said that she sees some City Councillors taking vast majority of campaign contributions from outside the state. She asked what good are the numbers. She said that she has been extremely engaged on things that are affecting all cities and towns across the country. She noted that there are groups that do not like the fact that she is exposing certain information. She said that she was showing movies and there were elements in the City that tried to shut her down. She said that she has been successful. She said that the Just-A-Start that manages her building told her at the last minute that she could not show two films and hold her event. She stated that she does not feel represented in the City. She said that her building has shut her down. She explained that she can no longer have events which brings her to the point of civic engagement. She said that there are a lot of buildings in the city that have function rooms where people can get together to talk and they are prevented from using these facilities. She said that she thinks that people do not feel represented and there is nothing to vote for. She thinks it is appalling to consider monetary incentives that she assumes will come from taxpayers.

Caroline Mac, 69 Chester Street, MIT student, stated that she has recently gotten engaged in local politics. She stated that she has been working on a voter registration web app. She said that the ideas are interesting. She said there is an information disconnect between local elections taking place. She said the website is difficult to navigate. She stated that having meetings and spreading of information would be helpful. She said that she has never come across a way that committees are publicized other than word of mouth. She said that there is a lack of excitement around voting. She said that engagement would be helpful.

Romain Waite, 60 Lawn Street, stated that it is about who is able to have their voices heard. He said that lack of knowledge and channels that reach people are reasons for low voter turnout. He said that there are concerns in terms of what it means to pay someone to do something that should be considered a civic duty. He stated that it is not good to think that cash is the only option. He said that bundling in terms of prizes that businesses could offer could be valuable but we must think more openly about all the options available to us.

Michael Nitch, 1 Aberdeen Way, asked whether we are thinking about this as all percentage increases. He said that if we were to increase voting overall by 5% and all 5% came from relatively young people who are migrating for a couple years, it would not be very valuable. He asked if we are talking about increasing participation full stop or are we concerned with certain kinds of people from the life of the city. He said that future conversations could be clarified to be clear about the focus.

Councillor Mazen stated that some of the things that have been heard focus around more community involvement and the need for more voters from disenfranchised communities. Mayor Simmons agreed that as the conversation advances, we must get to the underrepresented voices.

Councillor Mazen said that the Gold Standard would be mail-in voting which would not trouble the Election Commission. Ms. Ford responded that the Election Commission must follow State law which precludes mail-in voting for municipal elections.

Councillor Mazen stated that it is important to understand why certain neighborhoods and citizens are not voting. He suggested that this could be undertaken by poll or through street work.

Mayor Simmons said that it may be helpful to have a working group so that the Election Commission is clear about what the City is asking of them. She stated that maybe the City Manager could appoint some City staff to be part of the working group to develop ways to assess voting behavior. Councillor Devereux stated that she does not completely understand the role of the Election Commission and questioned if this is part of their responsibilities. Mayor Simmons responded that it may not be the role of the Election Commission but added that they are the experts in elections. She said that they have information in terms of who is voting and who is not and would be an integral part of the conversation.

Vice Mayor McGovern stated that there are a lot of issues that need to be fleshed out. He stated that as there is an upcoming meeting about campaign finance reform, he suggested that the Committee wait for the Roundtable with the Election Commission to have a more detailed conversation.

Ms. Ford stated that many people are not aware of the role of the Election Commission. She stated that two weeks from today they have to run a primary, two weeks later they have early voting and then the Presidential election shortly after. She stated that they will undertake five elections this year as well as the census and street listing work that must be conducted. She suggested that holding a meeting where it is outlined what can and cannot be done by the Election Commission may be a better approach moving forward.

Vice Mayor McGovern stated that he would not support a formal working group at this juncture due to the fact that he would rather have a much clearer sense of what we are asking of the Election Commission to do.

Councillor Mazen stated that he will try to get working group together that would come to the Roundtable Meeting with the Election Commission when it is rescheduled.

Mr. King asked about the upcoming Neighborhood & Long Term Planning, Public Facilities, Arts & Celebrations Committee hearing scheduled for August 29, 2016. Councillor Mazen responded that when running for office, there are generally a couple of different groups that candidate's target. He said that he went out of his way to target ethnic minorities and heard from those groups that they don't vote and told him that it will hurt his campaign. He stated that there is something going on in regards to democracy and equity. He said that this is a different discussion and there will be the need to spend substantive time in addressing this issue.

Councillor Mazen thanked all those present for their participation.

The hearing adjourned at 7:23 p.m.

For the Committee,

Councillor Nadeem Mazen, Chair
Neighborhood and Long Term Planning, Public Facilities,
Arts and Celebrations Committee

Vice Mayor Marc C. McGovern, Chair
Civic Unity Committee