



# ST. GEORGE CHARTER COMMISSION MEETING 1

## MEETING MINUTES

### WELCOME & INTRODUCTION

Councilman Ryan Heck, Commission Chairman, called the meeting of the St. George City Charter Commission to order at 6:00 p.m. on Wednesday, August 28, 2024.

Chairman Heck asked each member to introduce themselves, and attendance was recorded. Chairman Ryan Heck, Vice-Chairwoman Patty Cook, Norman Browning, Josh Hoffpauir, Chris Meyer, Erin Monroe, Andrew Murrell, Kimberly Plant, and Gerry Tarleton were present and voting members of the commission, with Jason Decuir and Rubin Patel absent. Brooks Belanger, John Snow, and James Trammell were also present on behalf of Emergent Method.

Chairman Heck called for and led the Pledge of Allegiance for all present.

Chairman Heck and Vice-Chairwoman Cook gave brief remarks about their passion and excitement for the opportunity to lead the charter-creation process and set the stage for the meeting.

### GOALS AND OBJECTIVES

Chairman Heck invited John Snow, a partner at Emergent Method, to lead and facilitate the remainder of the meeting. Snow presented background research on available governing models and the positive and negative aspects of each. Snow emphasized that while good and bad practices exist around the United States, there is no real best practice because each city is so unique. He encouraged the commission to think strategically to identify the best path forward for St. George

Snow presented the commission with several goals and objectives to ensure the St. George charter will qualify for the March 29, 2025, ballot.

## CONTEXT SETTING & BEST PRACTICES

### Lawrason Act Review

Heck and Snow presented an overview of the current St. George government structure under the Lawrason Act and the differences between it and a home rule charter. Chairman Heck articulated his belief that the Lawrason Act is not intended to govern municipalities the size of St. George, so a home rule charter is necessary to establish a government that adequately meets the needs of the city. Heck continued by explaining the importance of striking the correct balance and tone throughout the process to ensure the charter is specific where needed but ambiguous enough to allow for fluid and continuous government in perpetuity.

### Forms of Government

Snow presented background research on available forms of government and opened the conversation for thoughts and opinions on the appropriate form of government in St. George. Snow emphasized that every city uses a hybrid form of government in some way as each city selects which charter elements best meet its unique needs.

Commission members explained St. George petitioners are supportive of a council-manager form of government with extremely limited government. These citizens studied hundreds of cities over the last 15 years to understand key elements that drive success in peer cities. Heck noted East Baton Rouge Parish is proposing form of government changes in December and moving as close as politically possible to a council-manager form of government.

Hoffpauir made a point to state highly effective cities have more community engagement than is commonly seen in Louisiana. He argued the commission should consider which form of government would best engage community members in its government. Hoffpauir further reminded the commission that this document should be built to last for 100 years or more, so the group must think long term.

Browning asserted his preference for a council-manager form of government because it resembled a business structure and created rapid accountability for inaction. Browning shared his belief that this form of government better ensures the long-term success of a city with expert leadership. Browning continued explaining a need for codifying key philosophies of the city in the charter because other cities formed with similar philosophies have lost these elements of their government over time.

### Peer & Model Cities

Snow presented information on identified peer cities including population size, form of government, role of the mayor, size of city council, and term limits.

## CHARTER ELEMENTS OVERVIEW

### Charter Structure

Snow presented information on necessary charter elements found in most city charters. Snow also referenced the Model City Charter, which is a research-backed tool published and updated regularly by the

National Civic League. The Model City Charter will be helpful in building and drafting a home rule charter that best fits the needs of the City of St. George.

## **Key Decision Points**

Snow introduced a list of key charter elements that are often specific to municipalities or potentially controversial for the commission to discuss and consider. These include: strong mayor vs. council-manager, process for electing a mayor, process/structure for city management, term limits, compensation, other positions named in the charter, actions requiring an ordinance, process/thresholds for making charter changes, total council districts, and council at-large seats.

## **DISCUSSION**

### **STRONG MAYOR VS COUNCIL-MANAGER**

Chairman Heck opened the discussion by asking the commission to consider their preference for a strong-mayoral form of government or a council-manager form of government. The commission quickly arrived at consensus that a council-manager form of government is most appropriate for the City of St. George.

Meyer encouraged the commission to develop and explain a rationale behind their choice for a council-manager form of government.

Snow identified a potential negative aspect of the council-manager form of government where council members disagree on qualifications for a city manager, which can lead to unnecessary turnover.

Browning emphasized the role of the mayor even in a council-manager form where the mayor is still the figurehead leader of the city and responsible for representing the city to all parties.

Heck emphasized the benefits of a professional city manager who is hired for his or her expertise and skillset in city management.

Monroe asked about best practices for cities near the population of St. George. Snow responded by saying recently many cities have been successful with the council-manager structure, but there is no true best practice.

Plant asked if the City of St. George will be open to partnering with the City of Baton Rouge. Heck responded that the City of St. George will look to partner with Baton Rouge and all other surrounding municipalities.

Browning reminded the commission that this process will create job descriptions for future city leaders and employees. Meyer continued with this reference and equated the city council to a board of directors, a mayor to a chairman of the board, and a city manager to a chief executive officer in a business setting.

Heck asked the commission for their thoughts on part-time and full-time requirements for the city council and the mayor as well as the appropriate pay scale for these positions. The commission discussed the benefits and detriments of paying high and low salaries and did not reach a consensus.

Hoffpauir shared that while some residents have left the city since the incorporation effort began, others have stayed because they believe in the ability to make positive change. Hoffpauir continued residents want a sense of pride and place in their city and this charter should seek to create that.

Heck challenged a common perception that St. George is mostly wealthy residents. He argued that St. George is a middle-class community, but its demographic will create a large tax base and abundant resources. Heck continued by arguing this will allow the city to demand excellence in all facets.

Tarleton shared his belief that trying a council-manager form of government is logical.

***Monroe moved to approve a council-manager form of government for St. George and direct the home rule charter to be written in this form. Murrell seconded the motion. With no opposition, the motion passed.***

## **SIZE OF COUNCIL, TERMS, MAYOR, AND AT-LARGE MEMBERS**

Heck introduced the concept of at-large council members. Heck suggested 5 representatives, the current size of the council, is too small. He further explained best practice is to create districts that represent areas with unique and common interests. Heck also expressed his belief that the city council will approve 5 districts for St. George and asked the commission to consider adding at-large positions to expand the council. Commission members noted the city council could approve a district plan with 4, 5, 6, or 7 members, but Heck asked at-large seats be considered with an assumption of 5 districts.

Murrell stated that his ideal council would have 5 district representatives and 2 at-large representatives, with one of the at-large representatives serving as mayor. The mayor would have a vote on and preside over the council.

Heck stated his ideal council would have 5 district representatives, 2 at-large representatives and a mayor elected by residents that could have a vote on and preside over the council.

Meyer suggested the commission should wait for the demographer's final district determinations before setting the number of at-large seats.

Meyer also suggested staggering terms for district representatives and at-large council members. The commission briefly discussed the merits of staggered terms, and the group agreed that guaranteed continuity is good for the city. The commission took no action on staggered terms but agreed to explore the topic further once the council positions are set.

The commission reached a consensus that there should be at least 1 at-large council member but took no official action. The commission did not reach a consensus on the number of at-large council members nor the exact role of the mayor but agreed to revisit these topics after the demographer determines the number of council districts and/or at a future meeting of the commission.

***Cook moved for the mayor to be elected by residents. Murrell seconded the motion. With no opposition, the motion passed.***

## PROCESS TIMELINE & OVERVIEW

Snow led a discussion on the process timeline to ensure the home rule charter will be on the March 29, 2024 ballot.

Heck reiterated the importance of publicizing community meetings to drive awareness and participation from community members. He further emphasized the importance of passing the charter by the March 29, 2025 election so the plan of government is in place before the first group of elected officials in St. George take office.

Commission members raised key questions on the timeline and process, including:

What is the next step to ensure the proposed charter will pass a vote of the people? – *Heck said the city will need to conduct an education campaign to promote the charter and share its benefits with voters.*

Does there need to be a certain period of time between when the ordinance or resolution of charter adoption by the City Council needs to be introduced and then voted upon? - *This issue is unclear; counsel will research and return with an opinion.*

## NEXT STEPS

The city will hold a community meeting Wednesday, September 4, 2024, at 5:30 p.m.

The next charter commission meeting will be Wednesday, September 11, 2024, at 5:30 p.m.

Heck announced community meetings will be informational meetings, not official business meetings. All future meetings will begin at 5:30 p.m.

Heck also asked and encouraged all commission members to speak with their neighbors about the charter process and gather their input on what they would like to see in the eventual charter.

## PUBLIC COMMENT

Glenn Duncan, 616 East Woodruff Drive, Baton Rouge, LA, spoke in favor of the process and actions by the city.

## ADJOURNMENT

***Murrell moved to adjourn. Monroe seconded the motion. With no opposition, the motion passed.***