



# ST. GEORGE CHARTER COMMISSION MEETING 5

## MEETING MINUTES

### WELCOME & ROLL CALL

Councilman Ryan Heck, Commission Chairman, called the meeting of the St. George City Charter Commission to order at 5:31 p.m. on Wednesday, October 9, 2024.

John Snow initiated a roll call and attendance was recorded. Chairman Ryan Heck, Vice Chair Patty Cook, Norman Browning, Josh Hoffpauir, Chris Meyer, Erin Monroe, Rubin Patel, Kimberly Plant, and Gerry Tarleton were present and voting members of the commission, with Jason DeCuir and Andrew Murrell absent.

Chairman Heck called for and led the Pledge of Allegiance.

### APPROVAL OF MEETING 4 MINUTES

Heck moved to approve the minutes for the commission's meeting on October 1, 2024. Tarleton seconded the motion. With no opposition, the minutes were approved.

### PROGRESS TO-DATE, KEY DECISION POINTS

Mayor Dustin Yates addressed the commission to open the meeting. Yates stated the Chief of Public Safety was, in his opinion, the biggest outstanding decision point related to the draft charter. He thanked the commission for the discussion on this topic and shared his opinion that consensus leans toward electing this position. Yates encouraged the charter commission to consider adding protection language in the charter to codify the importance of certain tenets of the public safety function in St. George. Yates specified the importance of St. George not having a full-time police force and asked the commission to include this language in the charter. Yates explained that a decision of this magnitude should be reserved for the voters to make via a charter amendment if necessary.

Yates also introduced draft preamble language, which he wrote with the input of other commission members and the City of St. George's founders.

**Cook offered a motion to approve the preamble language as written. Tarleton seconded the motion. The motion carried without opposition.**

Snow transitioned the discussion to a public-facing overview of the commission's process to-date. Snow explained the commission decided early on that a council-manager form of government was appropriate for the City of St. George and provided context on the common practices associated with this type of government. Snow then explained other key decisions the commission has made to shape the current draft of the charter. Snow concluded with the outstanding items for discussion today and transitioned the commission to a discussion of these items.

A member of the public asked a question about the efficiency of a city manager reporting to seven city council members. The commission answered that this was a common practice.

Meyer asked a clarifying question about the council's ability to appoint and remove a city manager. The commission clarified that the city manager may be appointed or removed by a majority vote.

Cook opened a discussion on the public safety function. She shared that she preferred language that would prohibit a full-time police force as opposed to language prohibiting any paid police force.

Heck countered by saying the absence of a police force in St. George is crucial to the city's proposed budget structure. He continued by explaining his preference for allocating additional funding to the East Baton Rouge Sheriff's Office if necessary to pay for any additional safety needs. Heck concluded by emphasizing the founding principles of St. George, which did not include a police force.

Meyer continued Heck's sentiment, explaining his belief that a chief of public safety should not be elected because it unnecessarily politicizes the office. He continued explaining that the efficiency of government St. George has right now could be lost by electing a chief of public safety because of the platform an elected official would have to advocate for a paid police force, which would significantly increase city expenses.

Tarleton countered, emphasizing the people's right to select their leaders. He explained that an election is the purest form of this right. Heck responded by citing Tarleton's exceptional work as an appointed fire chief. Heck suggested an appointed chief of public safety may yield similar results. Tarleton replied, noting that this was not a conversation about his job. He continued by expressing his opinion that appointed chiefs of police could also be inadequate.

Browning emphasized the importance of having no police force and continuing to view the role as a public safety director, not a chief of police.

**Heck moved to make the chief of public safety an elected position. Tarleton seconded. Monroe, Heck, Tarleton, Plant, Cook, and Hoffpauir voted in favor, while Browning, Meyer, and Patel opposed. The motion carried.**

**Heck offered a subsequent motion that the chief of public safety serve a four-year term. Browning offered a second. Without opposition, the motion carried.**

The commission shifted the conversation to a discussion on guardrails surrounding the public safety function. The commission discussed the roles and potential of a reserve force, paid or unpaid status, and possible liability associated with this function.

City Attorney Sheri Morris noted that although some reserves are not paid, they do cost the city in the form of education, equipment, insurance, and other associated costs.

Heck noted the liability risk the city takes on by employing a police force, and specifically the liability associated with vehicles. Heck explained that City-Parish paid millions in settlement dollars that stemmed from police-associated vehicle accidents.

Meyer added his reservations that this force could grow and add a burden to the city budget.

Plant and Tarleton expressed concern that provisions prohibiting a police force would create an unnecessary hurdle for a future city council if the need for a police force arose.

Meyer countered this argument by saying that the decision is simply returned to the vote of the people in the form of a charter amendment. Meyer continued by saying that East Baton Rouge Parish already has twice the national average number of law enforcement officers, and it has not created a safe community. He closed by expressing support for supplementing the Sheriff's ability to conduct safety operations in St. George if necessary.

Plant noted recent discussions about a possible merger of the East Baton Rouge Sherriff's Office and the Baton Rouge Police Department. She asked the commission how this possibility could affect an agreement with the Sheriff's office to provide services to St. George. Hoffpauir noted that as an incorporated city, St. George would have more leverage over the type of decisions Plant referenced.

Cook noted the possibility of adding reserves through the Sheriff's office and using city funds to offset the additional cost.

A member of the public noted the Sheriff is short on deputies, BRPD is short on officers, and other cities are coming to Baton Rouge to hire law enforcement officers. Heck and Hoffpauir countered, saying St. George would face the same problems with staffing.

Tarleton noted that law enforcement has been short-staffed for decades. He continued, saying St. George could help with this problem by providing a reserve force.

Chief of Police Todd Morris noted that although the public safety role encompasses several public safety functions, the law enforcement function is and will be most criticized by the public. Therefore, Todd shared it is important for the city council to have the flexibility to make decisions around law enforcement, specifically the ability to create a limited police force if it is needed. He contended that St. George would attract a strong group of reserves and asked the commission not to close the door to a reserve force.

Hoffpauir suggested creating a reserve unit through the Sheriff's office specifically for St. George.

Todd Morris added that there is currently a problem with limited law enforcement to work traffic issues.

Browning suggested exploring ways to change state law to empower existing organizations, such as the constable, to take on more law enforcement responsibility in St. George.

The commission continued discussing and debating the permissibility of a full-time police force in St. George. With varying opinions, commission members shared their perspectives on the necessity of the option to create a police force and the challenges associated if a police force were to be established.

Heck noted the purpose of the chief of public safety role is to be a liaison between existing safety entities, not to lead and operate a city department. Heck emphasized the importance of holding the Sheriff and District Attorney accountable for safety instead of immediately defaulting to a St. George police force.

A member of the public noted that the city will develop creative solutions for safety instead of defaulting to a paid police force. He continued, saying safety is more important in the context of disasters, and the chief of public safety's role should be more focused on disaster preparedness and recovery.

**Monroe moved the language on public safety be adopted as written, including prohibitions on the establishment of paid public safety divisions in St. George. Hoffpauir provided a second to the motion. Browning, Meyer, Monroe, Heck, Patel, and Hoffpauir voted in favor, while Tarleton, Plant, and Cook opposed. The motion carried.**

City Attorney Sheri Morris asked the commission for clarification on the first chief of public safety. The commission agreed that the individual elected chief of police in March 2025 would be the first chief of public safety, which will be referenced in the transition section of the charter.

**Heck moved to adopt a limit of three consecutive terms, or 12 years in total, for the chief of public safety. Meyer provided a second. Without opposition, the motion carried.**

Snow introduced draft language prohibiting the enactment of dedicated taxes. Heck shared his request for this to be considered by the commission, explaining that in East Baton Rouge Parish, certain entities with a dedicated tax have large amounts of money that cannot be accessed to address other, more pressing needs. Heck asked the commission to consider this prohibition to ensure St. George does not end up in a similar scenario.

Morris noted that a prohibition of this type could limit the city's ability to use bond debt to make capital improvements and impede its access to some federal funds.

The commission agreed dedicated taxes were likely necessary and shifted the discussion to focus on the surpluses that are often created from these taxes. However, after discussion, the commission generally agreed on the difficulty in creating a policy to address this without unintended consequences.

Commission members agreed that this discussion was important, and it is important for the record to reflect reservations about implementing dedicated taxes for future reference.

**Hoffpauir moved to strike the draft language pertaining to dedicated taxes. Heck provided a second. Without opposition, the motion carried.**

Plant asked if the section addressing the council administrator role was intentionally broad. Meyer and Browning noted that the city council should have the autonomy to define this role as clearly as it sees fit.

Morris provided an update on the drafting of the transition section, specifically noting the logistical challenges associated with establishing staggered terms. Morris also asked the commission to select a preferred election date since the spring election is the most expensive. After discussion, the commission agreed that a fall election date would be best to minimize election costs and maximize turnout. The Commission also agreed that future mayor and city council terms will begin in January following the fall election.

Heck asked for clarification on whether the city council can make changes to the draft charter. Morris responded that the council may only vote to approve or deny; they cannot change the language. Heck noted that a call for a special session of the commission is possible.

## **NEXT STEPS**

Snow reminded the commission that its final meeting will be on Wednesday, October 16<sup>th</sup>. At this meeting, the commission will be asked to approve the draft charter to be shared with the city council.

## **PUBLIC COMMENT**

Public comment was received throughout the meeting. No comments were provided during the reserved public comment time.

## **ADJOURNMENT**

**Tarleton moved to adjourn the meeting. Hoffpauir provided a second. Without opposition, the motion carried. The meeting adjourned at 7:20 p.m.**