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Saratoga Springs: Attempts at Administrative Reform

The Case Study Series

This review of proposed change in governance and administration in the City of Saratoga Springs, New York is one in a series of communities in New York that took initiative to change the administration of their local government. These local initiatives were reviewed and summarized in 2020-22 by the Public Management Program (PMP), Department of Public Administration, SUNY Brockport. The cases were examined to provide insights for other local leaders and citizens in New York about options for change in local administration and governance. They examine (1) how initiatives for administrative change got started, (2) how local leaders and citizens responded to the initiative and moved forward, (3) the barriers and useful resources that were identified in the process, and (4) the experience since a change has been adopted - or not.

Saratoga Springs Community and Region

Saratoga Springs is one of 61 upstate cities in New York State. The city's 2020 population was 28,491, which represents a 7% increase from 2010. Saratoga Springs ranks 26th of 61 upstate cities in total population size. It is located in Saratoga County, New York with a 2020 population of 235,509 – also a 7% increase from 2010.

Saratoga Springs has been a popular resort destination for over 200 years. It is home to a number of attractive tourist venues. In addition, the city is part of the southeast gateway area to the Adirondack Park region.

Before 1915, what is today the City of Saratoga Springs, was a separate village and town of Saratoga Springs. With the adoption of a new city charter in 1915, the village and town of Saratoga Springs merged to become the City of Saratoga Springs.

With the new city charter, Saratoga Springs also adopted the mayor-commission form of government, which it uses to this day. With this form, which is relatively rare,¹ elected members of the legislative body – the commission – are also each given oversight responsibility of an administrative portion of the local government.

A provision of the city's charter requires a mayoral initiated review of the charter every ten years. The implementation of this provision has produced a number of ballot measures for change in Saratoga Spring's structure of governance.

¹ Many scholars of local government organization consider the commission form a flawed reform structure that failed based on the excesses

experienced and its subsequent large-scale abandonment (for example see, Rubin, 1998:2, and Nelson and Stenberg, 2018:26)

City Service and Financial Profile

The city provides a full complement of city services, including water supply and treatment, sewer collection and treatment, streets, fire, police, parks and recreation, and a city court.

Total 2020 budgeted city spending was \$47.1 million, with \$3.8 million (8% of total spending) in current debt service for ongoing capital investment needs. Revenues to support local spending are dominated by property taxes (33%), sales taxes (28%), departmental income (10%), state and federal aid (9%), and other sources.

Initiatives for Change

Various changes in the form of government organization has been actively pursued by local leaders and citizens in the City of Saratoga Springs a number of times in the last twenty years.² Voters have been divided in weighing the merits of these proposed changes. The most recent event in this series was a proposed referendum for change on the ballot in November of 2020.

The City of Saratoga Springs mayor-commission government allows for the election of one mayor and four commissioners (Dimopoulos, 2020).³ The part-time city commissioners serve both as voting commission members and oversee portions of the city administration with the aid of an appointed full-time deputy. City departments are combined into four commissioner oversight groupings: commissioner of finance, commissioner of public works, commissioner of public safety, and commissioner of accounts.

Of the sixty-two cities in New York State, only three currently use the commission form of organization, with one of the three having a city manager that modifies the typical pattern or form. Nationally, the commission form has fallen into disuse after its quick rise to popularity in the early 1900s (Rice, 1975). The most popular form of municipal government in New York State cities is mayor-council which ranges on a spectrum from strong mayor to weak mayor.

Looking at the history of Saratoga Springs helps provide some context for the most recent proposal for change. Since the turn of the century, there have been five attempts at governmental change. The figure below provides a sequential listing of each governmental change proposition since 2001, beginning with the 2001 charter change which kept the mayor-commission form of government and the proposed 2020 referendum. This summary is drawn from Thomeer (2018) unless cited separately.

An additional charter change referendum, not listed in the figure, initiated by a Charter Review Commission in 2018 failed to pass by a large margin. The 2018 charter change attempt proposed several modest changes, including; requiring the council's approval of appointments, setting educational and experience requirements for deputy commissioners (Charter Review Commission, 2018), and expanding the city council from five to seven members (Williams, 2018). This Charter Commission proposed referendum superseded⁴ a citizen led petition effort to put a reform measure on the ballot comparable to the 2017 measure that was narrowly defeated.

² In this case profile we summarize proposed charter referendums since 2000. Over its history Saratoga Springs has witnessed 11 attempts at charter change. Nine of these attempts made it to a public vote and one succeeded (Thomeer, 2018:2).

³ The successful charter vote in 1915 actually combined former town and a village governments to create a new city with a mayor-commission form.

⁴ In New York State, see Municipal Home Rule Law Section 36, a mayoral proposed charter review commission ballot measure has precedence over a citizen initiated one.

<p>2001 Approved Change – Charter Commission (methodical, included public input, minor changes)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Passed – 4,231 in favor (73%) 1,556 against (27%) <ol style="list-style-type: none"> Proposed Government Style: Mayor-Commission - unchanged Changed the budget process Added new deputy mayor position New provision for decennial charter review by charter commission
<p>2006 Proposed Referendum - Charter Commission (rushed)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Failed to pass - 3,412 in favor (39%) 5,433 against (61%) <ol style="list-style-type: none"> Proposed Government Style: Strong Mayor (4-year term) Seven city counselors: Maintain two-year terms, two city supervisors would vote, mayor would not vote Department heads would be appointed, no deputy positions, except for mayor.
<p>2012 Proposed Referendum – Citizen Petition</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Failed to Pass - 4,423 in favor (42%) 5,991 against (58%). <ol style="list-style-type: none"> Proposed Government Style: Council-Manager Manager answers to Council, responsible for day-to-day operations, in charge of hiring/firing Five city counselors; four-year staggered terms; legislators only
<p>2017 Proposed Referendum -Charter Commission</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Failed to Pass - 4,447 in favor (49.9%), 4,457 against (50.1%). <ol style="list-style-type: none"> Proposed Government Style: Council Manager - Council appoints manager Seven city counselors; four -year terms, staggered; limit of three full terms
<p>2020 Proposed Referendum - Citizen Petition</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Failed to Pass 6,601 in favor (45%) 7,909 against (55%) <ol style="list-style-type: none"> Proposed Government Style: Council Manager. Council appoints manager Six council members. To be elected by six new wards. Mayor elected city wide.

For each of the five there was either a board appointed charter commission, or a citizen petition that put proposed charter changes on the ballot. The proposals gained varying levels of support from the community. The 2001 charter change proposal gained the most support out of the five reviewed and was the only successful proposal. This ballot proposal made modest changes that the community could easily get on board with. The subsequent change proposals were more dramatic, proposing a move from the commission form to either a strong mayor or council-manager. The proposed changes in form predictably led to more division.

In New York State, in most instances, city legislative boards can achieve the step of creating a chief administrative officer without a citizen referendum. The need to change the commission form prohibits that step and is in and of itself a substantial barrier for government officials and citizens who are advocating for change. The commission form makes Saratoga Springs a relatively unique case among cities in New York that may want to explore creating the position of central administrator or change to the council manager form.

Thomeer (2018) raises the issue of the different tasks or roles that charter commissions face between: (1) creating the proposal for reform and (2) gaining community support to vote the reform over the finish line. Despite the failure of Saratoga’s last four proposals, the successful 2001 change demonstrates that through careful communication to understand what citizens valued and what change they wanted, a charter commission can build a proposal that reflects the values and concerns of citizens.

The 2001 charter change was Saratoga Spring’s only successful charter referendum in the last two decades. The 2001 change is notable because it received support from all governing board members that year and all other candidates running for office. This level of support helped the 2001 charter commission

convince the public that the changes were nonpartisan. An effective one-page fact sheet with details on the proposed changes to the charter was distributed by the commission to encourage residents to engage with the issue and offer their input. The public generally responded by asking for marginal change, which the charter commission accepted and incorporated into the proposal over the course of one year, resulting in modest changes to the existing charter. Dedication to the process, seeking citizen involvement, meeting citizens where they were, the widespread view of the charter commission as nonpartisan, and the modest changes that were proposed all contributed to the 2001 referendum's success.

Conscious attempts to find a coalition for change and avoid partisan divide can make a proposal more likely to succeed. For example, seeking a separate special election for a proposed charter reform can reduce linking the reform to the agenda of particular candidates, parties, or other ballot issues. In contrast, the 2017 Saratoga Springs proposed initiative was on the regular fall election ballot and was listed along with a contested state constitutional convention ballot initiative that had a vocal, organized opposition.

Expectations – 2017 and 2020

In the last two efforts to introduce charter changes in Saratoga Springs, supporters articulated the following reasons or improvement expectations for changing the form of government to create a council/manager form.

- Central professional coordination of public work across departments
- Improved communication and coordination between departments resulting in more efficient and economic operations

- Broaden the pool of potential candidates for both city council and mayor because council members would be legislators, not department heads requiring less time and affording more citizens the opportunity to participate. Similarly, mayoral candidates would not be in the position of city-wide administrative coordination and management.

These arguments for change in local government form were met by opposing reasons to maintain the status quo.⁵

- The present form of government has succeeded in attracting some good public officials with long terms of service.
- “If it isn't broke don't fix it” perspective. Saratoga Springs is a prosperous community with a healthy economy, strong housing market and other amenities. Without a significant local public sector incident or crisis producing financial impacts, the status quo in government organization is easier to support given normal concern over the uncertainties of change and the unclear financial implications of change.
- Some opponents of reform characterized the charter change as centralizing power in a new City Manager, rather than elected citizen representatives.

Resources - 2017 and 2020

Resources to shape and sustain the 2017 efforts of the Charter Review Commission's (CRC) work included both financial resources and other guidance and support. In the deliberation and drafting phase, the CRC drew upon International City/County Management Association's (ICMA) model council manager form charter and related resources. The CRC also received support and legal guidance on options from legal counsel staff of the New York

⁵ Public arguments and positions on controversial issues often represent other competing interests among community groups and factions.

State Conference of Mayors (NYCOM) and staff from the New York State Department of State. Municipal managers from communities in New York State made presentations and conducted information-based Q&A sessions for the CRC and community group meetings.

CRC financial support for both deliberation/drafting phase and for the referendum voting phase were provided by the city, but with some controversy and constraint. Three council (commission) members opposed the proposed change in form and resisted the needed funding to support the effort. The New York State City/County Management Association and the ICMA financially supported the referendum phase of the effort. This support was targeted as an outside influence and potential beneficiary of the change by local groups opposing the referendum to change to a manager council form (Friedman, 2017).

One persistent challenge that pro charter change forces will continue to face is the different requirements and resources available during different stages of the charter amendment process. During the initial policy development phase, a charter commission can, with enough planning, time, and resources, ask for input and carefully detail the changes that will be made if the proposal is approved. The relatively consistent messages from anti-change groups to “maintain the status quo” can also be addressed during the charter amendment's development process and help to factually address future anti-change arguments.

Summary Insights

1. **A Unique Case.** The commission form of local government organization has become relatively rare. It vests significant authority for portions of municipal operations in each elected commissioner/board member. Initiating a charter change that significantly alters the role of board members and creates a central manager to oversee municipal operations is a change which challenges the status quo. In addition, Saratoga Springs is a relatively prosperous and attractive community, which “raises the bar” when articulating the need for change in city governance and organization to citizens.
2. **Comparable Expectations.** Proponents of change in Saratoga Springs shared several common expectations for the creation of a central administrator or manager with all four of the cases in our study; (1) Better internal coordination among departments and their leaders; (2) Improved efficiency in government operations; and (3) Expanded pool of potential elected leadership by creating full-time central professional administrative capacity and reducing the time demands on governing board members and chief elected officials (mayors).
3. **Two Stages in the Process.** Local leaders that engage in efforts to change local government organization and create a municipal manager or administrator and face the prospect of a required or voter-initiated referendum will have a two-stage process. They will need to: (1) carefully draft a change proposal that will meet community needs and (2) conduct an effective communication campaign to convince citizens of the value and need for change. These two tasks are very different, requiring different skills and resources.
4. **Resource Needs.** This case highlighted that organizations that want to assist communities in informing this difficult decision process can help provide tools and objective guidance in three key areas: (1) Guidance on assessing and framing potential financial impacts of

change in form; (2) cases that provide insight into the experiences of other communities with change to a central administrative structure; and (3)

guidance on how to approach convincing voters of the value of the proposed change and an understanding of the financial resources required.

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