

Should Orange Adopt a Town Charter?

October 22, 2025

Introduction/background

Upon citizen request, the Orange Board of Selectmen appointed a Charter Advisory Committee in May to recommend possible changes to town government that would make it more effective.

Last week, after five meetings and extensive research, the committee unanimously voted to recommend that Orange adopt a town charter via a Special Act of the legislature. It also recommended some additional steps to make government more responsive to ongoing challenges and to better serve the interests of Orange citizens.

These proposed changes mainly involve shifting administrative work to town staff, freeing the Board of Selectmen to focus on policy while ensuring consistent, professional management of town affairs.

This evening we want to begin gathering public feedback on the recommendations.

Committee members

Chair – Tom Sexton

Vice Chair – Fred Heyes

Clerk – Lisa Aldrich

Members

Nancy Blackmer	George Willard
Chris Woodcock	Tony Leger
Keith Lyman	Jay Closser
Casey Bashaw	Todd Soucy
Pamela Oddy	

Agenda

- What is a Town Charter?
- Why should Orange consider adopting a Charter?
- What would change
- What would *not* change
- Process for adopting a Charter
- What happens next
- Public Feedback

What is a town charter?

The term "charter" refers to the basic provisions which set up the form, structure, and organization of government, including the powers and duties of the officials of a city or town government in Massachusetts. The charter is basically the "constitution" of the city or town.

Why should Orange consider adopting a charter?

...what we learned

At least *65 towns in the Commonwealth operate under a Charter. Thirty nine of these used Special Acts to establish a charter or create a Town Manager role; 26 used a Home Rule Petition

Towns with Charters list as benefits:

Financial Management	Professionalism
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Capital Improvement Plan + timely budgeting	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Keep up with ever evolving regulations
Responsiveness	Standardized procedures
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• It now takes weeks or months for some decisions	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Required to implement across all departments
Better Communications	Removal of antiquated titles, language
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• One voice that can speak for and to the town	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Changes Board of Selectmen to Select Board
Greater Accountability	Bylaw reconciliation
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Clear organization and centralized authority	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Reconcile antiquated bylaws with charter
Better recruitment and retention	Required, regular review of Charter
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Centralized hiring and management	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Schedule to review the Charter is established

What would change

- Appointment of a Town Manager as the chief administrative officer of the town, responsible to the Board of Selectmen and for the oversight of the four government divisions:
 - Finance
 - Public Safety
 - Public Service
 - The departments of Highway, Parks, Public Spaces, Cemeteries, Sanitation, Forestry, Water and Wastewater (these would become the Department of Public Works should Orange vote to create one)
- A Capital Improvement Plan would be required
- Timely submission of school and town budgets including Capital Plan
- Change Board of Selectmen to Select Board
- Town meeting moves from March to April

What would *not* change

- The authority of Town Meeting and elected officials
- Existing elected positions remain elected, including Town Clerk
- No DPW at least for now

Process for adopting a charter by Special Legislation

- Public engagement and feedback
- Review by Attorney General
- Passage, by majority vote at town meeting, of a warrant article or resolution proposing the special legislation
- Petition the Legislature to enact the proposed legislation
- Hearing by assigned committee of the Legislature
- Approval of the petition by House of Representatives and Senate
- Signing of special legislation by the governor
- *May include a provision to require approval of a majority of voters at a town election -- as final step before charter takes effect*
 - Alternatively, special legislation could be worded for charter to take effect on a specified date without an election vote

What happens next, timeline

- Ongoing public engagement
- Attorney General Review
- Town Meeting approval
- Submission and approval by Legislature

Public feedback