

Recommendations to the Orange Board of Selectmen by the Charter Advisory Committee regarding advisability of a town charter

Submitted October 15, 2025

Background

The Charter Advisory Committee was formed by the Orange Board of Selectmen in May 2025 to investigate the advisability of adopting a town charter. This report summarizes the committee's findings and provides recommendations based on extensive research, public input, and analysis of Orange's current governance structure. The committee has concluded that a town charter would offer significant benefits to the Town of Orange, including enhanced clarity of governmental roles, improved efficiency, greater accountability, and increased citizen participation. This document outlines the rationale for these recommendations and provides a framework for potential next steps should the Board of Selectmen choose to pursue a charter, keeping in mind that a charter may also be implemented by Home Rule Petition initiated by registered voters.

Process

The committee has met five times (see attached minutes), interviewed officials in other towns where charters have been proposed and/or implemented, met with our elected representatives at the state and local levels to seek their input, talked with members of the Massachusetts Municipal Association about forms of local government and how to affect change, studied available options to implement change, talked with most department heads and some board members in Orange about what they think is working or not working in terms of effectiveness and what to do about it – all with the goal of making government more responsive to the needs of citizens.

We considered various methods to accomplish the committee's mission "To investigate changes to town government and recommend possible changes to the Selectmen that will make it more effective."

These include policy changes the Board of Selectmen can make in the short term, such as updating the job description of town administrator to give the position more authority, bylaw changes and adoption of a charter via special legislation or by Home Rule Petition. In the short term, Massachusetts law, under the Massachusetts Constitutional Amendment Article 89, gives citizens several ways to make changes in local government to achieve better outcomes.

Findings

The committee has found that in Massachusetts towns where a charter has been adopted and implemented including neighboring Athol, town government has become more responsive and professional, employee recruitment and retention has improved, the financial picture has been made more transparent, communications about key issues have improved and evolving regulations are well-managed. In short, better outcomes for citizens have been achieved through consistent, professional management of town affairs.

Recommendations

1. Using the special legislation approach, the committee recommends that Orange adopt and implement a town charter along the lines of the attached draft.
2. Considering that the charter process will take a minimum of 10 months, the committee also recommends that the Board of Selectmen rewrite the job description of the town administrator to give the position greater authority, to the extent permitted by Massachusetts General Law, to execute tasks currently assumed by the Board of Selectmen. These could include day-to-day management of town departments, routine licensing and contractual matters, human resources and other items in order to free up the Board of Selectmen to focus on policy.
3. Consider bylaw changes at upcoming Town Meetings to codify changes that cannot be achieved via policy and that further the goal of putting professional, consistent management of town affairs in place sooner than later.

Attachments/links

Charter Draft

Letter to Board of Selectmen

MMA docs

Minutes

Committee members

Existing Conditions report

<https://www.dropbox.com/scl/fi/5xsliggn6u2ac0hsqtec/2.6.24-Orange-Existing-Conditions-Report.pdf?rlkey=1ccq52wd81dp6hkij8t02a0ay&e=1&st=n68zxp5&dl=0>