

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 shorter-term 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 under a Charter
- What would ***not*** change under a Charter
- 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:

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

What would change under a charter

- 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 June to May

What would ***not*** change under a charter

- 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 and Town Counsel
- 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
- If approved by the Legislature and signed by the governor in a timely manner, the charter would become effective on July 1, 2026.

What happens next, timeline

- Ask the Board of Selectmen to:
 - Pass a motion to place the Charter on an upcoming Town Meeting Warrant
 - Rewrite the town administrator's job description to add responsibility for day-to-day tasks
- Consider bylaw changes at an upcoming town meeting to implement key items in the Charter
- Take public feedback regarding the Charter
- Legal review
- Town Meeting approval of the Charter
- Submission and approval by Legislature and governor
- Implementation effective July 1, 2026

Public feedback