

Sandisfield Town Charter Committee seeking 2 at-large members to fill 5-member committee

The Town of Sandisfield is seeking interested residences to serve on its Charter Committee. A five-member committee consisting of one member of the Select Board, Finance Committee and Planning Board (already appointed), and two at-large residents. A facilitator will help the Committee productively discuss significant topics by assisting with a decision-making plan and options, providing frameworks for decision-making, providing ideas and examples, etc., during a series of meetings with the Committee, and the Committee's recommendations will be brought forward at town meeting for consideration by the voters. The Committee will be subject to the Open Meeting Law and will require a Chair and a Secretary, and the creation and approval of Agendas and Minutes. The expected timeline is January 2023 through mid-summer.

The Town of Sandisfield was incorporated in 1762. As with many Massachusetts towns with populations under 5,000, the Town does not have a charter. Instead, Sandisfield operates under what is often referred to as a "legal base," which includes local bylaws, state laws accepted, and special acts of the legislature requested by the Town. Although the lack of a charter is common among Massachusetts towns with populations under 5,000, there has been a trend over the last few decades for these towns to write and adopt charters. The reasons for this are clear: the world in which towns operate has become significantly more complex over the last half century, and the pace of change continues to accelerate. Even just since 2000, the environment that towns operate in has changed substantially, with new state and federal laws, new demographic and environmental challenges, changing financial circumstances, rapidly-changing technology, and a growing divide between residents' expectations and towns' ability to deliver.

Some towns have responded to this by making the occasional changes to the structure via bylaw changes or narrow special acts. While these can certainly help solve some challenges, they are unlikely to solve all of the issues, and they can also introduce new challenges. As many towns have found, a stronger solution is to take a comprehensive and systemic look at how the Town government is operating, understand what is working, and identify any changes that would help provide the community with a government that will be more effective, efficient, responsive, and transparent. Moreover, whether the resulting changes from a charter process are major or only small updates, codifying those changes in a single, clear document can help the Town government better serve the public and help the public better understand the Town government.

At the same time, partially because undertaking the writing of a charter can have such a significant impact on the town for years or even decades to come, it is also an extraordinarily challenging endeavor – statutorily, logistically, and politically. For that reason, most towns embarking on the charter-writing or reform process seek outside expertise.

Interested parties please contact Janey Beardsley, Sandisfield Administrative Assistant, for more information.