



Montpelier's Charter Dictates A 'Weak Mayor' System

It is important to understand the actual role of the mayor in the city's charter. Montpelier's mayor does not even have a vote unless it is to break a tie. According to our charter, the elected mayor is not given the power to establish city priorities. Annual priorities are determined by consensus at a private retreat. The mayor is one co-equal voice among seven in the room. A mayor with the power to establish any sort of priorities on his/ her own would need to involve a majority of council recommending a city charter change to create a 'strong mayor system', voters approving the proposed change, followed by the State Legislature approving the change as well.

The Only Three Powers Invested In Montpelier's Mayor

- The mayor represents the city at events or at meetings
- The mayor establishes the rules for the meetings, determines the agenda for city council meetings, and chairs the council meetings
- The mayor is the point person with the City Manager's office. Establishing meaningful oversight and overall accountability of the operation of the city on an ongoing basis working in consort with others on the elected council

Montpelier's Present Major Water/Sewer Infrastructure Crisis Is The Direct Result Of Incredibly Lax Oversight

The bottom line is that the near absence of any kind of meaningful oversight and accountability has resulted in the present major crisis in under the street infrastructure. Most notably, the random water pipes bursting around Montpelier's core with the repair crews puzzling over where to find the pipes because the city has never systematically mapped the entire underground system as any well run city would have long ago. Over the last four years, there have been an average of two water pipe breaks a week. Council has repeatedly funded costly spot repairs without demonstrating concern about why this is happening with such frequency. Prudent concern would have resulted in commissioning outside authorities years ago to assess the condition of the aged underground water/sewer pipes, map where the pipes actually are, and assess the water pressure issue and what can be done to responsibly address concerns. Under our charter, mayors are charged with assuring this happens. With water main breaks of this magnitude, effective mayors go beyond their city's department of public works that has ignored the root causes and seek out expert counsel in water/sewers. Recurrent operational issues demand accountability. Mayors report to their councils and their councils inform the public. This never happened here. In the case of Montpelier's water/sewer infrastructure there is no paper trail to follow. No emails between mayor and city manager in either direction. No reports from the city manager on inquiries from the mayor. There is only infrastructure denial. Council as well as the city manager fearing the aggregate cost of what they might learn were they to seriously assess the condition of an under the street infrastructure that is sending us clearly signals of its dire condition with each costly temporary repair of a busted water main leak. Council chooses denial as if the ultimate bill will never arrive. It will. Better that we know what we don't know so that we can intelligently triage to minimize costly temporary water main repairs and intelligently shape a viable plan that addresses short term problems. Putting off broken water mains to fold their remediation into long-term comprehensive studies is another form of denial of the immediate pressing problem at hand.

Residential pipes across town bursting from extremely high water pressure best represents the perils of lax and minimal oversight. The state recommended substantial changes in water pressure that would have been costly; perhaps in the range of \$30 million which is very serious in a town of 7,500. City management fought back aggressively with its council kept in the dark. The details of the state/city dispute for decision making purposes didn't appear at council meetings.

They didn't appear in the city manager's report. City residents were complaining of their water pipes bursting. In the background, city management was actively stonewalling the state's concerns about their pipes. There were no written reports to council on these critical negotiations. Mayor Anne Watson met periodically with the city manager yet there are no written notes of their discussions. No follow up emails on what was discussed. Nothing in writing from the mayor to her council. With a possible \$30 remediation on the line, there are no indications of any meaningful council oversight whatsoever. Council was publicly briefed only after the city and state had already agreed. This does not under any definition constitute 'oversight'. It is more of an afterthought. Another slighting of the severity of the ongoing infrastructure crisis that requires leadership from a mayor who is an outsider with an outside perspective.

Concrete Steps I Would Immediately Implement To Increase Accountability Through Oversight

- There needs to be an urgency in addressing water/sewer as the ongoing operational issue that it always has been. We already have one needed piece commissioned- an outside hydraulics study to probe high water pressure and alternatives for remediation. We desperately need the other critical piece- an outside mapping of the entire system and its condition across the town by qualified outside authorities. Projects are frequently stalled simply to locate the pipes involved. It is that bad. A preliminary report should be presented to council in six months in September along with a projected long-term cost. The existing fifty year plan should not be the basis for future planning. The new study should be prepared from the outside instead. One based on facts under the ground. The ultimate remediation approach should come from council to the City Manager and Public Works--- not in the other direction. Their job is implement council's preferred approach; not dictate it.
- The next City Council will finally arrive at a fair and equitable resolution with residents whose water pipes were damaged as a result of high water pressure. Our Public Works Department requires accountability.
- The Elks Club land was purchased without a firm rationale and any sort of price tag as to what it would cost including new sewer/water/streets/lights as well as possible land subsidy to developers. The measure to purchase was approved by voters and they deserve their vote respected. At the same time, the concept also requires serious accountability. I propose six months for proponents to prepare a sound business case for the land including the total estimated city expenditures over time detailed out line by line including new sewer/water/lights as well as possible land subsidy to developers. The business case would include a realistic time frame with benchmarks. In September, council would either resell the land and put the money into sewer/water in existing Montpelier or reprioritize long-term capital replacement to accommodate the project. Either way, council under this mayor would make a firm decision
- The next council would pursue concrete alternatives for siting a recreation center so that the Elks Club is not the only option. Placing it on land we already own should be presented. The Recreation Field on Elm would be costed out as would building it adjacent to Montpelier High School. Both take advantage of synergy. Both should be presented in September as alternatives complete with their estimated construction and operating budgets.
- A proposed civilian police review board will not appear on future council agendas, however council will take steps to solicit citizen input from all residents on how to increase council oversight over the city manager regarding how citizen concerns about policing are processed and adjudicated
- The mayor will not insert suggestions from study groups into agendas until they have first been vetted by the stakeholders that would be directly affected. A good example. In the future, prior to submission the Homeless Taskforce would first have to formally vet their proposals for new spending for formal comment by those directly impacted including the Montpelier police department, the faith based community that might have to feed more, downtown businesses that would have to deal with more on street begging, the Parks Commission that still has a dusk to dawn curfew in Hubbard as well as the city of Barre which shares the same population. When their proposals are fully vetted and comments from the effected stakeholders are included, their request would appear on council agenda. The same with Confluence Park. The proximate lot has always been used for downtown customer parking. They need to vet their plans for parking with merchants for comment before they get on the council agenda again.