

## Mandi Jo Hanneke

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**From:** Peter Demling <demlingp@arps.org>  
**Sent:** Wednesday, June 14, 2017 12:50 PM  
**To:** charter@amherstma.gov  
**Subject:** Fwd: The case for staggered four-year terms  
**Attachments:** Peter Demling - staggered four-year terms.pdf; term length comparison.pdf

Hi again Charter Commission,

In light of last night's feedback session, attached is a one-page summary comparing two-year, three-year and four-year terms.

As I wrote in my previous proposal (below), I believe four-year terms are preferable to two-year terms, for all the reasons provided. So if you are absolutely not open to considering town elections outside of odd-numbered years, I consider this the better option between the two.

In addition, I still believe (as previously written) that three-years is the term-length sweet spot, and ultimately the best choice you can make. I was encouraged to hear other support for this, and am hopeful that you are open to considering it in your pro/con, cost/benefit analysis of all options (knowing that no option is perfect). I therefore put together this one-page comparison chart to highlight why I feel three-year terms are the best choice among the three, when all factors are fully considered.

Thank you very much again for your consideration, and please let me know if you have any questions.

Regards,  
-Peter Demling  
Amherst School Committee  
774-222-0409

----- Forwarded message -----

From: **Peter Demling** <[demlingp@arps.org](mailto:demlingp@arps.org)>  
Date: Fri, Jun 9, 2017 at 3:51 PM  
Subject: The case for staggered four-year terms  
To: [charter@amherstma.gov](mailto:charter@amherstma.gov)

Hi Charter Commission,

Attached is my proposal to make the term lengths of at least the school committee be "staggered four-years" (two seats in one odd-numbered year, three in the next odd-numbered year).

It's a three-page pdf; I did my best to organize it for summarized reading.

Thank you very much for your consideration, and for your discussions on this so far; and please let me know if you have any questions.

Regards,

-Peter Demling  
Amherst School Committee  
[774-222-0409](tel:774-222-0409)

Peter Demling  
Amherst School Committee  
06-09-17

## Summary

This is a request to make the term lengths of at least the school committee be “staggered four-years” (two seats in one odd-numbered year, three in the next odd-numbered year). Detailed reasons are below.

While I feel that three-year terms are the sweet spot for producing the most effective school committee, I understand the reasons and very strong support for wanting all local elections to take place in November of odd-numbered years.

In addition, while my primary concern is the school committee, I support staggered four-year terms for all town offices for the same reasons, so this reasoning applies to all offices.

I wish to enthusiastically support the final charter proposal, and the school committee term-length issue is a major concern for me, so please feel free to contact me at [demlingp@arps.org](mailto:demlingp@arps.org) or 774-222-0409 if you’d like to discuss further.

Thank you for your consideration, thank you for having met with the school committee on multiple occasions, and thank you for listening to and incorporating our prior feedback regarding school committee size and composition.

## The case for staggered four-year terms for all

Assuming that all town elections will take place in November of odd-numbered years (for reasons of voter turnout and engagement stated elsewhere), term lengths must be an even number of years. If we take it as a given that six or more years is too long, then the choice comes down to two or four.

The goals I consider when making this choice are:

- Make candidates as accountable as possible to the full and clear will of voters
  - Hold frequent-enough elections
  - Make the number of candidates and races per election manageable, so voters have enough time and attention to engage with and focus on individual candidates
  - Balance the influence of all voter concerns and priorities, as the emphasis and spotlight of different issues ebbs and flows over time
  - Make election rules and office definitions as easy as possible for voters to understand
- Provide stability on the governing bodies to produce the most effective governance
  - Overlap new member terms with incumbent terms, to smoothly impart complex institutional knowledge and experience
  - Give the employees managed by those bodies consistency of expectation and direction, so they can perform their jobs most effectively
- Encourage broad candidate pools, set public office holders up for success
  - Require the right amount of individual time/monetary investment in high-stakes campaigning
  - Provide enough time to learn and grow on the job

### **My primary concerns with non-staggered two-year terms for all**

- Creates elections with too many simultaneous races and candidates for the average voter to reasonably learn about and engage in substantively
- Frequently and undesirably exposes the whole of town governance to single inflection points in time, disproportionately emphasizing the prevailing issues of the day
- Creates a turnover rate and campaign frequency that makes it harder for office holders (and the people managed by them) to perform their role most effectively and knowledgeably

### **On the number of simultaneous races and candidates**

- 13 Town Councilors + 5 SC + 6 Library + 4 Housing = 28 races every two years, all at once (this total may be out of date with your most recent draft; should be close). Let's say all seats are contested by a minimum of 2 candidates: that's 56 candidates, all vying for the limited amount of public attention in the few weeks that most voters are able to give leading up to election day. To be fair, any one voter isn't going to care about the 8 Council races outside their ward; and let's say they don't care about Housing (although we hope that's not the case). That still leaves 16 races to attend to, with 32+ candidates in a good year of all races contested.
- I would submit for your consideration that such an election is far too crowded, and works *against* the goal of increased accountability – because accountability requires not only the chance to vote, but also the capacity to make reasonably informed decisions with the time and resources one has available. 32+ candidates to pay diffuse attend to in a short window of time does not set voters up for success to make reasonably informed decisions, in my view. Another way to state this is: while regular elections are certainly necessary for accountability, increased election frequency does not necessarily correlate with increased accountability.
- When imagining how these elections would operate, our current situation with a large number of TM seats is not a good analogy – those seats do not have close to the same level of town-wide attention that these new seats would require. A better analogy would be: imagine the entire SC, and the entire Library, and the entire Housing Board, and the entire SB, were just up for election this past March: would it have felt manageable, or overwhelming; and how would it have felt to the average voter?
- We're all looking to increase turnout and bring in new voters; we therefore want to make their evaluative task - their cognitive load - as manageable and non-overwhelming as possible. Reducing by half the number of races and candidates that voters need to evaluate every two years would greatly assist with this task, in my view.
- A large number of simultaneous high-stakes campaigns also increases the risk of disproportionate financial influence from individuals or groups. Contested town-wide races today easily exceed 2K to 3K per campaign. There is a finite number of contributions available from the general public. Greatly increasing simultaneous campaigns would strain this availability, leaving it to highly resourced individuals or groups to offset differences - according to their own preferences. This would be an undesirable outcome.

### On exposing all seats to one political moment

- Any one moment, any single election, is a unique inflection point in time, disproportionately emphasizing the prevailing issues of the day over many other concerns which are of equal importance, but just so happen not be shining in the spotlight as brightly at that particular moment. This is a fine and natural occurrence. For example, the elementary building project received outsized attention during the last SC race; it's what was on the minds of voters, and the candidates properly responded to and were influenced by it.
- But many other school issues of equal importance received far less attention *at that time*, and so the question when designing an election-mechanism is: knowing that single points in time are unbalanced expressions of voter will, unequally representing all concerns, to what degree do we want any single election/moment to influence the composition and long-term direction of our public offices and boards?
- I would submit that staggered terms encourage a greater diversity of perspective on boards, because not all candidates are "born of the same political moment." For example, the full SC turning over to slates of BOLD and SASS this past March might have been an accurate reflection of public will at that moment; but by reacting to that important but single issue, it would have undesirably produced a board with less accountability to the full and comprehensive set of public concerns. Staggered terms provide a beneficial level of insulation to boards, preventing the imbalances of single points in time from having an outsized effect on the full board composition.
- Regarding ranked-choice voting, I do want to say I really like it, and hope you recommend it (though not as part of the charter itself – I think that would complicate charter understanding for the average voter next March). However, I don't see it addressing the above-stated issues. What it does is effectively smooth-out voter-intention, so that winning candidates more accurately reflect the collective voter will *at one time*: it does not change the inherent nature of a point-in-time itself, which is to be a naturally unbalanced and disproportional expression of the full and comprehensive set of public concerns.

### On long-term stability of boards, office holders, and those managed by them

- The preservation and handing-off of "institutional knowledge" is essential for maintaining a long-term view with well-organized operations. This goes beyond the low-level errata that on-board training or brief lame-duck overlap might provide. Agenda setting, SI evaluation, contract negotiations and regional budget complexities are just some examples of skills that can only be absorbed and learned with experience over time. No one member has them all. A certain amount of this is inevitably lost with any level of turnover; but overlapping terms greatly decreases the risk of major loss without proper transition, avoiding the need to frequently "reinvent the wheel."
- The ramp-up learning curve is steep for these complex roles. We want to give office holders the time needed to learn, grow into, and then execute effectively in their role, before needing to turn their attention to re-election. And while asking four years of service raises the commitment bar, asking for half the number of campaigns lowers it. As a parent of three with a full-time job, I see any number of years as a huge commitment and time sacrifice; and so two-year terms would not significantly alter the ease-of-entry for new candidates, in my view.
- When campaigning, I asked every principal what they were looking for in a SI and SC. The most common theme I heard was "stability" and "consistency." Employees want to know what their managers expect of them. As town employees answerable to elected officials, a certain level of change is inevitable; and so the question when designing an election-mechanism is, what will produce the most helpful level of stability and consistency, while at the same time be responsive and accountable to voters? All seats up every two years and at the same time introduces too much churn, too high a level of volatility, putting undue strain on managed employees (SI, Town Manager, etc) by increasing the level of difficulty to reasonably plan publicly-supported long-term directions.

| Comparison of term-lengths          | Two-year terms,<br>every two years | Three-year terms,<br>every year | Four-year terms,<br>every two years | Commentary  |
|-------------------------------------|------------------------------------|---------------------------------|-------------------------------------|---|
| Years between elections             | 2                                  | 1                               | 2                                   | Elections every year empower voters with the most frequent opportunity for influence: the chance to change 1/3rd of government, every year.   |
| Number of town races per election   | 28                                 | 9                               | 14                                  | The greater the number of races, the more difficult the voter engagement task, the less accountable individuals candidates become. 28 is a very large number of races all at once.  |
| Number of school races per election | 5                                  | 1 or 2                          | 2 or 3                              | The greater the number of races, the more difficult the voter engagement task, the less accountable individuals candidates become.  |
| Ease of general voter understanding | Medium                             | High                            | Low                                 | "Every year in November, always for town offices, always the same term" is simplest.  |
| Percent of races per election       | 100%                               | 33%                             | 50%                                 | Single elections changing most or all of a board at once work against long-term voter accountability, as single points in time are unbalanced expressions of the full array of voter concerns.  |
| Maximum turnover per election       | 100%                               | 33%                             | 50%                                 | The greater the turnover, the more difficult it is to retain real institutional knowledge/skill (regardless of orientation effectiveness), operational stability, and consistency of expectation to board-managed employees.                            |
| Increased turnout in even-years     | No                                 | Yes                             | No                                  | Elections every year mean uneven turnout; but I would submit that a boost from good to great turnout for town offices in even years would be a good thing. Cross-election turnout consistency is not the primary goal; increased turnout/engagement is. |
| Separate ballot in even years       | No                                 | Yes                             | No                                  | A separate ballot is more work for the Clerk's office and more expense for the town.  |
| Required service commitment         | 2                                  | 3                               | 4                                   | Two years makes narrowly-focused "one issue candidates" more likely; four years feels long (to most candidates and voters).   |
| Years to learn job                  | 2                                  | 3                               | 4                                   | Orientation and training don't replace the organic, on-the-job experience required to learn and execute complex role responsibilities.  |
| Required campaign frequency         | 2                                  | 3                               | 4                                   | An attention shift of elected officials away from their job, and back to campaigns, so soon after their first election, and so frequently in the middle of their work, is undesirable.  |

### Summary

The advantage of four-years over two-years is half the number of races for voters to manage, half the exposure of government to one election, half the potential turnover on boards, and enough time to learn the job and set consistent expectations for managed-employees.

The advantage of three-years over two-years is a third the number of races for voters to manage, a third the exposure of government to one election, a third the potential turnover on boards, enough time to learn the job and set consistent expectations for managed-employees, increased election frequency and a boost in turnout in even years.

The cost of a separate ballot and the boost in turnout in even years does not outweigh these significant advantages, in my view.