

Main Barrier To County Reform Is The Assembly Of Delegates

By ERIC TURKINGTON



If you didn't attend either of the public hearings held by the Barnstable County Assembly of Delegates Charter Review

Committee on June 25 or July 9, you had lots of company.

Only four people came to those two hearings to offer their opinions on how county government could be improved. But those four were a very distinguished quartet.

Former state senators Henri Rauschenbach and Rob O'Leary were the principal saviors of Barnstable County back when Governor Bill Weld wanted to abolish it, and were key players in providing the county with the revenue streams that sustain it.

Paul Niedzwiecki (former executive director of the Cape Cod Commission, and now of the Cape Cod Chamber of Commerce) and Andrew Gottlieb (former county Wastewater Collaborative head and now executive director of the Association for the Protection of Cape Cod), were the other two.

The message from all four was the same: with a budget smaller than even the smallest Cape town, Barnstable County does not need 18 elected people—15 Assembly members elected from the Cape's 15 towns, plus three county commissioners elected Cape-wide—to handle its affairs.

Gottlieb and Niedzwiecki

expressed the most frustration.

"Nobody cares about the assembly's tug-of-war with the commissioners," Gottlieb told them. Having 18 elected people in charge of a \$20 million budget is "a waste of your time," he observed. But this superfluous structure "continues to hobble along."

Niedzwiecki was even more pointed.

"You're not going to make any changes," he predicted to the Charter Review Committee. Some entities are too big to fail, he observed, but the assembly is "too small to fail."

This is not the first time the county structure has been looked at and found in need of reform. In 2012 and in 2016, various proposals were considered—three county commissioners? Five county commissioners? No county commissioners? An elected manager? An appointed manager? Keep the Assembly of Delegates? Abolish the Assembly of Delegates? A smaller Assembly of Delegates?

After much talk, nothing happened then. And nothing will probably happen now.

The problem is that under the current county charter, adopted in 1988, any county reform needs the assent of the Assembly of Delegates, and it is extremely unlikely that they will vote to recommend any plan that abolishes their own positions.

The assembly's 15 elected delegates are mostly smart, thoughtful, civic-minded individuals. (Over the years, Falmouth has sent Julia Taylor, Sue Moran, Doug Brown and now Dan Gessen.)

It describes itself as "an

independent co-equal branch of government" whose job is "maintaining checks and balances over the executive branch."

In reality, lacking the power to tax or to create laws that anyone has to follow, the assembly is mostly reduced to nitpicking the county budget, passing meaningless resolutions and initiating turf squabbles with the county commissioners.

Last year, the assembly put a question on the ballot to give themselves more control over the county budget, but the voters rejected it. In March of this year, they voted to authorize hiring special counsel to sue the county commissioners. Their most urgent budgetary initiative is to double the size of their own staff. The current budget for the assembly's operations is \$450,000.

Prior to the creation of the assembly in 1988, county finances were reviewed by a financial advisory board, with one select board member from every Cape town. A similar structure, perhaps made up of town managers this time, could do most of what the assembly does, for a lot less than \$450,000.

A simple five-member board, elected town-wide, which appoints and sets policy for a professional manager, is the governmental model that works for most Cape towns. It would work well for Barnstable County. But as long as the assembly has a veto over any reform that would put it out of business, this reform—or any reform—will never happen.

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