Clean and Open Elections Task Force

Meeting Notes April 24, 2018

I.   Participation

In attendance

Joe Beckmann, Nate Clauser, Vishal Doshi, Ariel Horowitz, Andrew Levine, Sara Oaklander, Josh Rosmarin, Nick Salerno, Eric Weisman

Not in attendance

Annie Connor, J.T. Scott

II.   Meeting Overview

1. Plan to approach all proposed recommendations and evaluate if the group wants them to be included in our final report
2. Decide by consensus when possible, with consensus defined as each member of the committee being willing to support the option
3. We plan to strive for consensus but will also support recommendations by majority vote should we be split on an issue.
4. Will go through recommendations which have been organized by theme by Sara

III.   Recommendation Template – will be used to structure final report

1. Matrix
   a. Keeps us from having a report without pictures, and adds something skimmable that shows what our priorities and criteria are
   b. Would include emojis that show how each item scores on our criteria
2. Text describing recommendations
   a. Description of recommendation
   b. Path to implementation
   c. How we know it will be effective
3. Other things this should include
   a. Counter-arguments – shows we considered the options and so bolsters legitimacy of our recommendation

IV. Recommendations Designed to encourage greater voter participation in elections
Notes to capture discussion and if the recommendation is accepted

A. Reschedule municipal elections such that they coincide with state elections – Adopted by consensus
1. Discussion
   a. New information on this subject
      - Task force member spoke to Minnesota municipality where the elections are going from odd to even years. According to their office, there has been little confusion from voters and the measure will save them money when running elections.
      - This example is similar to the findings from the studies of similar measures in California
      - Also spoke to City officials in Providence who said there were no logistical difficulties to have even year municipal elections rather than odd
   b. We don't have any examples in Massachusetts of consolidated elections, but the state is not in favor of it
      - Would require a charter change and, we believe, a home rule petition
      - Would currently require two ballots, but if the state put local candidates on their ballot, it would be much more efficient
      - This could cause elections to be more expensive, but there would be fewer elections, which would save money.
   c. Concern expressed that local elections would be overshadowed by state and federal elections, and that it would be hard to make informed votes
      - There is limited evidence this would happen
      - Turnout rate for those positions most often left blank still higher than it would have been on the off year
      - Hard to tell difference between an engaged/informed and disengaged/uninformed vote
2. Do we want to include this recommendation in the report?
   a. Yes – Accepted by consensus
   b. One member has concerns around local politics not being supported, but wishes to join consensus.

B. Extend voting rights to citizens age 16-17; Encourage pre-registration of 16- and 17- year olds until this change is enacted – Adopted by consensus
1. Discussion
   a. Where should the cutoff be for voting? Should we consider the vote from birth proposal?
      - Proxy voting is a challenge here, as residents may not be comfortable with this yet.
      - Political feasibility would support a cutoff closer to 16, rather than younger.
      - 16 is used in other countries, other cities in the US, and "feels like it represents a shift in maturity" – when we can drive here

2. Do we want to include this recommendation in the report?
   a. Yes – accepted by consensus (With the voting age at 16)
   b. Would also like to include a note about vote from birth.
   c. Can argue that proxy voting in the name of representing interests of those who are too young to vote is worthwhile, and suggest the city consider it, even though we will not formally recommend it at this time

C. Extend voting rights to non-citizen residents of Somerville – Adopted by majority vote, 6-1
   1. Do we want to include this recommendation in the report?
      a. Yes – accepted by majority vote.
      b. Vote: 6-1

D. Extend voting rights to Incarcerated residents of Somerville – Adopted by consensus
   1. Do we want to include this recommendation in the report?
      a. Yes – Accepted by consensus

E. Support the Adoption of election reforms at the state level, including:

Electronic poll books and vote centers – Further research needed before final determination
   1. Clarification
      a. Vote centers allow residents to vote anywhere, including at untraditional locations (like a grocery store or transit station)
      b. Vote centers require electronic poll books, which means the state would need to extend the technology that exists for early voting to election day
      c. The literature suggests the turnout impact isn't huge
   2. Discussion
      a. This is something we would be interested in seeing at the state level, but the city can't do as much alone
      b. Some concerns about this information being mostly online, rather than in paper form
   3. Do we want to include this recommendation in the report?
      a. We're holding on this recommendation – preliminary vote was 3 yes, 2 qualified yes, 2 not. More information needed and we'll consider again.

Election day registration – Further research needed before final determination
   1. Discussion
      a. Would also be recommending to support at state level
      b. Would require electronic poll books – and same concerns
   2. Do we want to include this recommendation in the report?
      a. We're holding on this recommendation – more information needed and we'll consider again.

Automatic voter registration – Adopted by consensus, with one abstention
1. Do we want to include this recommendation in the report?
    a. Yes – Accepted by consensus, with one abstention
2. Check on status of this legislation – want to articulate it correctly

Ranked choice voting – Adopted by consensus
1. Clarification
    a. Need to determine how this would affect primaries, as there are differing implementation modes of this policy
    b. We are not supporting the current proposal by Voter Choice Massachusetts
2. In this case, we will only consider the proposal at the city level – we are undecided on its adoption at the state level
3. Do we want to include this recommendation in the report?
    a. Yes, recommend adoption by the City - Accepted by consensus

F. **Design a mechanism for Somerville's Election Commissioner to reach out to the voters to encourage participation – Adopted by consensus**
1. Do we want to include this recommendation in the report?
    a. Yes, in multiple languages - Accepted by consensus

G. **Hold election day activities at or nearby to polling places – including free food and drink, music, and more – Adopted by consensus**
1. Do we want to include this recommendation in the report?
    a. Yes - Accepted by consensus

H. **Relocate polling places to sites that are more likely to ensure that all voters feel safe and welcome (i.e., avoid locations such as police stations and houses of worship) – Adopted by consensus**
1. Discussion
    a. Noted that finding suitable places is challenging
    b. One option is to suggest that the election office get consulted during the design process of new public entities to see if it could potentially be a polling place in the future. Decided against this as the city already considers public space in new building construction
    c. Frame recommendation such that the City should actively seek to create alternative polling sites so that those spaces ensure that voters feel safe and welcome
2. Do we want to include this recommendation in the report?
    a. Yes – Accepted by consensus

V. *Additional Thoughts and Questions*

1. Targeted voter turnout – by age, race, ethnicity, home ownership status, etc. – should we be looking at this?
   a. Argument that anything that ups turnout makes turnout more representative – the research matrix supports equity to the extent we have information about it
   b. Shouldn't report include looking at improving disproportionality?
   c. Short of specific outreach to these underrepresented groups, we're doing all we can
   d. Suggests that we might include some sort of analysis of status quo in report, and link that to recommendations
   e. Find out if Jackie Rosetti's messages go out in other languages

2. Include reference in the report to things that are going on statewide that we believe would benefit Somerville – recommend that the City advocate for passing of these measures by advocating our state delegation.
3. Might help to have a "straw budget" with more context of how expensive these recommendations would be in the final report; however, this is not necessarily information we can obtain, at least not with any certainty
4. Is it worth it to make recommendations that are more logistically difficult to enact? We are willing to make such recommendations and note they are aspirational
   a. Important to note what would make an especially large impact, even if may be politically difficult
5. Are we overstating amount to which people are motivated to vote even on national issues? People vote for many reasons.
6. Turnout of contested v. uncontested elections – in the competitive wards, turnout more than doubled in 2017

VI. *Next Steps*

1. Questions on protocol and timing for report – Eric will pose these questions to Annie.
   a. Process for submitting the report – e.g., do we submit to Mayor first and he submits to the Board? Will he request edits from us before it goes to the Board?
   b. How to maximize timing of submission to optimize impact. Proposed deadline June 30; however, concerns expressed about timing vis-à-vis budget season and other pressing issues before the Mayor and the Board. Board meets 2nd Thursday in July and typically takes a break after that. Not sure what this year's schedule will be, given new composition of the Board.
   c. Will we be expected to present the report in person, or are we able to request that we do so? If presentations are included, timing matters - want to be sure this can be done at a time when the Mayor/Board of Aldermen are not too overwhelmed with other matters
   d. June 30th deadline for draft report? Eric will explore this with Annie

2. Can begin writing up our recommendations based on template
    a. Nate and Josh will adapt the recommendations they worked on (Nate – suffrage, Josh – Festivals, consolidation, outreach)
    b. Ariel – ranked choice
    c. Andrew – Relocate polling places to sites that are more likely to ensure that all voters feel safe
    d. Vishal – status quo/targeted voter turnout

3. Process
    a. As we draft, send around to everyone and allow for comments in Google Drive
    b. Target May 6th as deadline
    c. May 9 - next meeting - need to go through next sets of recommendations; Nick can't do the 9th – Elections Commission meeting that eve
    d. Ariel away end May/early June

4. Other next steps/considerations to remember for the final report
    a. Share summary of key data re: voter turnout over time – Nick and Eric
    b. Check on status of automatic voter registration legislation to ensure we speak to it correctly
    c. Include some sort of analysis of status quo in report with regard to what we know about who is turning out to vote and link that to recommendations
    d. Include reference in the report to things that are going on statewide that we believe would benefit Somerville – recommend that the City advocate for passing of these measures by advocating our state delegation.
    e. Important to note in the report what would make an especially large impact, even if may be politically difficult