

Charter Revision and Amendment for Home Rule Cities and Villages

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Background for Change

Michigan cities and villages exist within a framework that is part of a greater system of state and federal law. The system is described in governing documents which fit into a hierarchy of importance and must be kept current. Constitutions, statutes and charters are primary examples of these documents.

Most Michigan cities are incorporated under the Home Rule City Act, 1909 PA 279 (HRCA) (MCL 117.1 et seq.). Home rule villages are created through the Home Rule Village Act, 1909 PA 278 (HRVA) (MCL 78.1 et seq.) The HRCA and HRVA are statutes that were authorized by the Michigan Constitution of 1908, and currently by Article VII, Section 22, of the Michigan Constitution of 1963.

Locally, the city or village charter is the principal governing document. This article addresses existing charters of home rule cities and villages. As each community changes in various ways over time, its charter has to change with it. The same is true at the state and federal levels. The U.S. Constitution has been amended 27 times to date. Michigan has had four constitutions and numerous amendments. Statutes are being enacted and amended constantly.

When a charter becomes outdated it hinders the ability of local government to serve properly. A charter that is no longer current is one with provisions that are illegal, obsolete or missing. Changes are needed to correct misleading, unreliable or unresponsive charters.

Illegal Charter Provisions

Charter provisions may be preempted by other law. No provision of any city or village charter shall conflict with or contravene the provisions of any general law of the state (MCL 117.36; 78.27). Other instances of illegality result when a court declares them so.

Obsolete Charter Provisions

The mere passage of time contributes to charter obsolescence.

Provisions that once made sense in the history of a community may later be irrelevant or too restrictive. Certain dollar limitations for expenditures, titles of municipal officers and departments, and descriptions of functions are some of them. Archaic charter language, or charters dominated by male pronouns, also contribute to examples of obsolescence. One charter provision may be in conflict with another, leading to confusion of interpretation.

Omitted Charter Provisions

Does the charter claim all powers allowed by law or does it unduly limit their exercise?

The HRCA and HRV provide in similar language that each city or village charter may provide “for the exercise of all municipal powers in the management and control of municipal property and in the administration of the municipal government, whether such powers are expressly enumerated or not; for any act to advance the interests of the city or village, the good government and prosperity of the municipality and its inhabitants and to pass all laws and ordinances relating to its municipal concerns, subject to the constitution and general laws of this state” (MCL 117.4j(3); 78.24(m)).

The HRVA permits a village to adopt as part of its charter any chapter, act or section of state statutes not inconsistent with the act, which relates to the powers or government of villages generally (MCL 78.25).

The HRCA and HRVA prescribe certain charter content. Essential provisions are mandated. Others are permissive. Still other provisions are prohibited, or are further restricted.

Room for Improvement

With decades of experience under municipal home rule, generations of citizens have come to view home rule as deserving of the public trust, as reflected increasingly in modern charter language.

Does the community want or need more innovative charter provisions than presently exist? It is possible to guide local officials, officers and employees in their various functions by specific creative charter authorizations declared to be in the public interest. Examples are continual planning for change, providing continuing education at all levels of civic participation, improving intergovernmental relationships, employing alternative dispute resolution methods, conserving resources, both human and environmental, keeping the public informed of vital concerns, enhancing cultural qualities, and promoting ethical standards and behavior.

Examination of the local charter for practical use should also raise the following questions:

Is it organized in logical sequence?

Does it define key terms?

Is the language clear and understandable?

Are provisions easy to locate when needed?

Does it have an index?

Is it preceded by a meaningful preamble and historic statement?

To Revise or to Amend

The two forms of legally authorized changes are by revision or amendment of the charter.

The home rule acts allow communities to make substantial or nominal changes in their charters by different routes. Charter revision implies re-examination of the entire document and that it may be recreated without obligation to maintain the form, scheme, or structure of the former charter. Amendment implies that the general plan and scope of the former will be maintained, with corrections to better accomplish its purpose. Revision suggests fundamental change, while amendment is a correction of detail, according to the Michigan Supreme Court.

A change in the form of government will require charter revision and not merely amendment. What constitutes such a change may require in-depth study. Legal advice should be sought if that question arises.

Charter Revision

Revision of city charters may be initiated by a resolution adopted by 3/5 of the legislative body or by petition signed by at least five percent of the registered voters, unless the present charter provides otherwise. In any case, the decision to revise is for the electors to approve or reject. They must also select a nine member charter commission to revise the charter, none of whom may be an elected or appointed city officer or employee. Both matters may be voted upon at the same or separate elections. An advisory vote may also be taken on the question of a change in the form of government.

The initiation of a home rule village charter revision requires a 2/3 approval vote by the legislative body, or by electors' petition of at least 20 percent of the total vote cast for president (village) at the last preceding election, unless otherwise provided by charter. The village charter commission consists of five elected members.

The municipal legislative body determines the place of meeting, the compensation of charter commission members, and provides funds for expenses and ballots.

The city charter commission convenes on the second Tuesday after the election. The city clerk presides at the first meeting. The clerk administers oaths of office and acts as the clerk of the commission.

The village charter commission convenes within ten days after its election, and frames a charter within 60 days thereafter.

The city and village charter commissions assess the qualifications of their members, choose their officers, determine their rules of proceeding, keep a journal, and fill their vacancies. City charter commission members are compensated for attending a maximum of 90 meetings (one per day). A majority of city charter commission members constitute a quorum. Three or more village charter commission members are a quorum. Commission sessions are public.

It is generally advisable for a city charter commission to engage a legal consultant experienced in these matters as there are numerous legal issues at stake. The county prosecutor is required by statute to advise village charter commissions.

A proposed revised charter is submitted to the governor for approval. The attorney general reviews it and advises the governor regarding its legality. The governor signs the charter if approved; otherwise the charter is returned to the charter commission with a commentary of recommended corrections.

An approved proposed city charter is to be published in full as prescribed by the charter commission. The attorney general's position is that publication is to be in a newspaper in general circulation within the community, which is the statutorily required method of publication of village charters.

The adoption of the revised charter is for the electorate to decide by a simple majority of those voting on the question. Specific provisions for a city charter may also be decided as separate ballot propositions. The ballot questions are to be approved for clarity and impartiality by the attorney general. The ballot contains voting instructions and explains the effect of each proposal.

If a proposed city charter revision is rejected, the charter commission reconvenes and determines whether to take no further action or to proceed with a further revision. If no action is taken, the city charter commission ceases to exist. Proposed revised city charters may be submitted to electors by a charter commission three times within a three-year period. A new proposal to revise a charter may be voted upon at any time after termination of the charter commission.

A proposed revised village charter must be filed with the village clerk not less than 90 days before the election. A revision may be submitted to the electors only once in two years.

Charter Amendment

Amendment of a city charter may be proposed by 3/5 of the members of the legislative body, or by an initiatory petition of electors. If proposed by the legislative body, the proposal is submitted to the electors at the next municipal or general state election, or

special election held in the city not less than 60 days after it is proposed. In the case of petitions, the election is to occur not less than 90 days following their filing.

A village charter amendment may be submitted to the electors by a 2/3 vote of the legislative body or petitioned for by not less than 20 percent of the number of electors voting for president at the last election.

The governor is presented with the proposed amendment of a city or village charter for approval, and signs it if approved. If not approved, it is returned to the legislative body with stated objections for reconsideration. If 2/3 of the members agree to pass it, it is submitted to the electors. If the amendment was initiated by petition, it is submitted to electors notwithstanding the objections.

An amendment to a village charter is submitted to electors at the next general or special election. An amendment originated by the legislative body is published and remains on the table for 30 days before action on it is taken. The form of a proposed amendment to appear on the ballot is determined by resolution of the legislative body, unless provided for in the initiatory petition. Publication is made in a newspaper published or circulating in the village at least once, not less than two weeks, nor more than four weeks before the election.

Proposed amendments are to be published in full with existing charter provisions to be altered or abrogated by them. The purpose of a city charter amendment is designated on the ballot in not more than 100 words, exclusive of caption. The statement of purpose must be true and impartial so as to create no prejudice for or against the amendment. The attorney general examines it for compliance before its printing. The amendment is conspicuously posted in full in each polling place. The form of the proposed amendment is determined by resolution of the legislative body unless provided for in the initiatory petition. In the latter case the legislative body may add an explanatory caption.

A proposed amendment is confined to one subject. If a subject embraces more than one related proposition, each of them must be separately stated to allow an elector to vote for or against each proposition.

A majority vote of electors voting on the question is required to pass an amendment.

A failed proposed amendment to a city charter may not be resubmitted for two years.

Legal References

The sections of the Home Rule City Act that directly relate to charter revision are 18, 19, 20, 22, 23, 24, 26, and 28. Those that govern amendment are 21, 22, 23, 24, 25, 26, and 28. The corresponding sections of the Home Rule Village Act are 14, 15, 18, 19, 20, 21, and 26 for revision and 17, 18, 19, 20, and 21 for amendment.

The remaining provisions of each of the acts, respectively, must be referred to in considering changes to a city or village charter. Certain features of each municipal charter are mandatory and are not subject to exclusion. Others as noted above are permissive or restrictive and deliberate consideration is to be given to them. Constitutional provisions and a host of statutory laws also bear upon what may appear in charters, and to what extent and content.

Courts have interpreted the validity of various charter provisions and the statutes that dictate their use. The Michigan attorney general has also rendered opinions, when requested, for guidance in areas of specific legal concern.

All sources of law that bear upon charter issues need to be consulted in any effort to reform charters, to achieve the desired benefit to the communities served by them.

Charter Revision Strategies

To do justice to the charter revision process, it is well to project an 18-month time frame after the election of the charter commission in order to complete the task. Each commission will set its own pace. It should meet regularly and assign a chapter of the charter at a time to be considered at a subsequent meeting or meetings. The review of each provision should be by all members so that each participant has a grasp of the issues involved. The entire charter document is subject to revision and improvement. Officeholders are to be consulted for views regarding the effect of current charter provisions upon their duties and performances.

It is well for the commission members to wrestle with and to dispose of the most volatile issues first and to resolve them expeditiously and to then close ranks. The charter commission must present to the public a unified approach and avoid divisions caused by single or limited issue positions, which tend to discourage voters and lead to defeat of the product of countless hours of study, debate and drafting. It is also well to have one

person draft all segments of the document, to preserve continuity of style and form. Until the commission approves a final version, each draft should be regarded as tentative to allow the entire work product to evolve into a cohesive whole.

The election cycle is a foremost consideration in the timing of charter submission to the electorate. To achieve timely completion of the charter is to also allow sufficient opportunity for review by the attorney general on behalf of the governor. It is prudent and a courtesy to those offices to request their optimum timing in advance. The review of total charter language is given expert, in-depth analysis by the highly experienced assistant attorney general in charge of that service. The reviewer may need to refer various articles of the charter to other state agencies for inspection. Further consideration must be given to the prospect that added time will be needed for adjustment if objections are raised.

Revised charters and amended charter provisions approved by the electorate with the vote for and against are filed in duplicate with the county clerk and the secretary of state, within 30 days after the vote is taken. They become effective upon filing, unless a different effective date is specified in the document, in the case of a city charter.

Conclusion

The service performed for the community by the members of a charter commission is immeasurable and has its own reward. It is a significant honor to participate in the creation of the document that most directly affects the quality of local government and the well-being of its citizens.