

Government Administration and Elections Committee

JOINT FAVORABLE REPORT

Bill No.: HB-7125

AN ACT CONCERNING REFERENDA ON REVISIONS TO MUNICIPAL

Title: CHARTERS AND HOME RULE ORDINANCES.

Vote Date: 3/12/2025

Vote Action: Joint Favorable

PH Date: 3/7/2025

File No.:

***Disclaimer:** The following JOINT FAVORABLE Report is prepared for the benefit of the members of the General Assembly, solely for purposes of information, summarization and explanation and does not represent the intent of the General Assembly or either chamber thereof for any purpose.*

SPONSORS OF BILL:

Government Administration and Elections Committee

REASONS FOR BILL:

There has been a growing concern over the vagueness of charter and home rule ordinance referendums on local ballots. Some municipalities have proposed referendum in previous elections that consolidated potentially significant changes into a single question. Other municipalities have titled their questions in a manner which have received complaints over a perceived vagueness that obscured the changes in the eyes of some registered electors. This bill would seek to require that municipalities alter their charter and home rule ordinance referendums on the local ballot to provide clarity on the items up for adoption.

RESPONSE FROM ADMINISTRATION/AGENCY:

Shannon Kief, Legal Program Director, State Elections Enforcement Commission:

We neither support nor oppose the bill but recommend the following clarifications:

The bill refers to and then amends Sec. 9-369b (c) -- see lines 42 – 47. This change may be unnecessary and may lead to confusion—on its face, the entirety of 9-396b already applies to all referenda, including these. Our concern is that, as drafted, the language in lines 42 – 47 may lead to confusion about what types of public funds may be used to advertise or explain to the public the nature of the referendum before them.

NATURE AND SOURCES OF SUPPORT:

John McNamara, Majority Leader, New Britain Common Council:

As an elected official who puts referendums on local ballots, I welcome the state establishing new standards on charter questions. Reform is needed to give local commissions and city

councils specific criteria. This bill is better than the ones considered in 2023 and 2024 by specifying five areas to be made clear on the ballot. Ballot questions are important in empowering our democracy.

Theresa Gerratana:

I served on the GAE committee for many years during my long career in the General Assembly. The bill concepts have been before this committee for the last three years and I think this latest bill has simplified the process and addresses concerns that were raised in previous sessions. A one size fits all questions is troublesome and it is unclear for voters.

Ann Speyer, Secretary, League of Women Voters, New Britain:

The bill provides a safeguard on the language of ballot questions for voters to know what they are voting on when their town seeks to change its Charter. In my testimony I have identified the most important areas of change. These could be formatted to have a yes or no answer.

Aaron Good Coordinator, New Haven Votes Coalition:

This is a conscientious and commonsense effort to provide structure to the regulation of municipal referendum questions. We believe the charter revision convening, appointing, and veto authority should be balanced across different branches of government. The current imbalance creates conflict and dysfunction. We would propose removing lines 28-30 that permit the combining of term length changes across multiple or all municipal offices. We also recommend separation of the charter recommendations into 4 or 5 questions. Most charter revision commission recommendations are technical in nature that can produce a confusing and long ballot. There also needs to be robust appeals process to allow for additional checks. We do believe that the current language does strike the right balance.

Diane Hoffman:

I support the requirements that the following 5 items should be listed on the ballot if the charter revision recommends changes:

1. Charter changes to the manner in which the Common Council (or governing body of the municipality) is elected.
 2. Charter changes changing whether specified officials are elected or appointed or changing their term of office. The office affected would be named in the question, i.e. Treasurer, City Clerk, etc.
 3. Charter changes which alter residency requirements for municipal department heads.
 4. Charter changes in the required notification of hearings to the public which affect the budgetary process.
 5. Creation or Dissolution of Boards and Commissions of the city or town.
- Other changes should appear in a generalized question.

Kerry Ann Kowar:

As a seasoned voter, I know that most voters do not familiarize themselves with referenda questions and are often confused which results in them not either not voting or just checking a box. This bill eliminates the confusion and questions so many voters have when faced with charter revision questions on the ballot.

Ann Reed, Vice President, League of Women Voters, Connecticut:

The League of Women Voters asks that you support this bill. It brings understanding to the questions that appear on the ballot for charter revisions proposals. Clarity in referenda questions can only build trust with voters if there is broad transparency.

Carol Reimers, LVW of the East Shore:

It is important for voters to have a clear understanding of the impact a referendum would have. Simple language and information help a voter determine if they support or oppose a proposed or home rule ordinance. Voters do not want nor deserve surprises the revision might have on their towns.

Abigail Roth:

Charter revisions generally happen once a decade and have a significant impact on municipal governments. Many charter revision ballot measures are bundled, vague and require up and down voting on multiple issues. This results in people skipping the vote. The proposed language in this bill improves transparency without making them more confusing. I would offer one friendly amendment and that is to require changes to the lengths of terms of offices to be separate items on the ballot. This would ensure voters make informed decisions on changes to municipal government.

Aimee Pozorsk:

As a career English professor, I remember former students reaching out to ask me to help them interpret the language on the last charter revision in New Britain. We need precision, clarity and simplicity on ballots that are deciding important issues.

Kenneth Speyer, New Britain:

As an attorney I would request one clarification that brief language be added to the bill stating that other proposed amendments may be listed separately than the following.

(A) Any change in the manner by which the legislative or governing body of the municipality is elected

(B) Any change in whether officials of the municipality are elected or appointed, or in the terms of office of such officials

(C) Any change that imposes, repeals or alters a residency requirement for the head of any municipal department

(D) The creation or elimination of any municipal board or commission, with specific reference to each such board or commission

(E) Any change regarding the provision of public notice for public hearings that relate to the municipal budget process.

For items (B) and (C), making the same change or requirement for multiple officials can be combined in a single question.

The following League of Women Voters submitted testimony in support:

Elsa Obuchowski, Steering Committee Member

Joanne Moore, Southeast CT

Mary Consoli, Northern Fairfield County

Pua ford, Amity

Mary O'Brien

The following also submitted testimony in support:

Mary Brien

Emma Groves Baldacci

Patricia Mccurdy

Majola Nelson

Peggy Riotte

NATURE AND SOURCES OF OPPOSITION:

None expressed.

Reported by: Pamela Bianca

Date: March 17, 2025