

**Overview:**

The following proposed provisions aim to include a number of additional mechanisms for residents of Cambridge to engage directly with the Cambridge government, as well as provide regular opportunities for the public to make recommendations to the city council on specific issues. The first section of this proposal outlines a few resident participation mechanisms that could be included in the charter: Free Petition, Citizen Initiative Petition & Citizen Referendum. Additionally proposed is including a Public Engagement article in the charter that includes a statement of principles and structures to engage the public, within this article would be a yearly resident assembly and a public engagement commission.

**Resident Participation Mechanisms**

- I. [Free Petition](#)
- II. [Citizen Initiative Petition](#)
- III. [Citizen Referendum](#)

**Public Engagement**

- I. [Public Engagement Article](#)
- II. [Resident Assembly](#)
- III. [Public Engagement Commission](#)

## I. Free Petition

**Overview:** Provides a mechanism for citizens to petition the government, and a signature requirement necessary to compel action/response from the government body petitioned (ex: petition to establish bike lanes in certain area may require 150 signatures from registered voters to compel a public hearing by city council). Also includes notice requirements for action, and limitations (ex: no hearing shall be required on any one subject more than 1x every 12 months).

1. **Petition:** 10 residents can petition for a communication to be placed on the next city council agenda (regardless if topic is not on the agenda).
  - a. Question: How to ensure unhoused are able to use this provision?
2. **Group Petition:** Requires a signature threshold (often 150-200), and requires council to hold a public hearing on a topic. Limits on how often a subject can be petitioned.

Decision Points:

- Signature requirement for group petition

Sample Language:

### Watertown

SECTION 7-8 - CITIZEN PETITIONS TO COUNCIL OR SCHOOL COMMITTEE.

The city council or the school committee shall hold a public hearing and act with respect to every citizen petition which is addressed to it, which petition shall not be required to take any particular form, and is signed by one-hundred-fifty voters, or more, and which seeks the passage of a measure concerning matters other than action under section 7-11(c). The hearing shall be held by the city council or the school committee, and the action by the city council or the school committee shall be taken not later than three months after the petition is filed with the clerk of the council or the secretary of the school committee, as may be appropriate. Hearings on two or more petitions filed under this section may be held at the same time and place. The clerk of the council or the secretary of the school committee shall mail notice of the hearing to the ten persons whose names appear first on the petition at least forty-eight hours before the hearing. Notice, by publication, of all such hearings shall be at public expense.

### Amherst

SECTION 8.2: FREE PETITION

(a) Resident Petitions, Action Discretionary: The Town Council, School Committee, and Library Trustees shall receive all petitions signed by 1 or more residents and addressed to any of them concerning a matter upon which they could act and may, in their respective discretion, take such action in regard to such petitions as they deem necessary and advisable.

(b) Group Petitions, Action Required: The Town Council shall hold a public hearing and act with respect to every petition which is addressed to it and which is signed by at least 150 voters as certified by the Board of Registrars. The hearing shall be held by the Town Council or by a committee or subcommittee thereof, and the Town Council shall act not later than 3 months after the petition is filed with the Clerk of the Town Council. Hearings on 2 or more petitions filed under this Section may be held at the same time and place. The Clerk of the Town Council shall mail notice of the hearing to the 10 petitioners whose names first appear on each such petition

at least 14 days before the hearing. The Town Council shall publish a general summary of the subject matter of the petition and a notice stating: (i) the times and places where copies of the group petition are available for inspection by the public, and (ii) the date, place, and time not less than 2 weeks after such publication, when a public hearing on the petition will be held by the Town Council. No hearing shall be heard upon any 1 subject more than once in any given 12-month period, as determined by the Town Council President.

## II. Citizen Initiative Petition

**Overview:** Process for requesting that the legislative body (city council or school committee) pass a certain measure, including number of signatures required, review by city solicitor, submission to city clerk, and review by registrars or election commissioners. Also includes the timeframe for acting on citizen initiative measures, presumption of rejection if inaction, supplemental petitions (if rejected by legislative body, may bring petition direct to ballot), publication requirements, form of question on ballot and the time the measure takes effect if passed by voters.

Decision Points:

1. Number of signatures (% of total voters from most recent city election)
  - a. Example: 2021 Cambridge Election (22,079 voters)
2. City Solicitor timeline for review and determine if lawful
3. Timeframe for council or school committee to take action on petition
4. Possible supplemental petition to get question on the ballot

Sample Language:

### Watertown

Commencement - Initiative procedures shall be started by the filing of an initiative petition with the clerk of the council or the secretary of the school committee, as the case may be. The petition shall be addressed to the city council or to the school committee, shall contain a request for the passage of a particular measure, which shall be set forth in full in the petition, and shall be signed by at least ten percent of the total number of voters as of the date of the most recent city election. Signatures to an initiative petition need not all be on one paper, but all such papers pertaining to any one measure shall be fastened together and shall be filed as a single instrument, with the endorsement thereon of the name and residence address of the person designated as filing the same. With each signature on the petition there shall also appear the street and number of the residence of each signer.

Within ten days following the filing of the petition the board of election commissioners shall ascertain by what number of voters the petition has been signed, and what percentage that number is of the total number of voters as of the date of the most recent city election. The board of election commissioners shall attach its' certificate to the petition to the clerk of the council or the secretary of the school committee according to how the petition is addressed. A copy of the certificate shall also be mailed to the person designated upon such petition as having filed the same.

(b)

Referral to City Attorney - If the board of election commissioners determines that a petition has been signed by a sufficient number of voters, the clerk of the council or the secretary of the school committee, as the case may be, shall forthwith following receipt of such certificate deliver a copy of the petition to the city attorney. Within fifteen days following the date a copy of the petition is delivered to the city attorney, the city attorney shall, in writing, advise the city council or the school committee, as may be appropriate, whether the measure as proposed may lawfully be proposed by the initiative process and whether, in its present form, it may be lawfully

adopted by the city council or by the school committee. If the opinion of the city attorney is that the measure is not in proper form, the city attorney shall state the reasons in full in the reply. A copy of the opinion of the city attorney shall also be mailed to the person designated on the petition as having filed the same.

(c)

Action on Petitions - Within thirty days following the date a petition has been returned to the clerk of the council or to the secretary of the school committee by the city attorney, and after publication in accordance with the provisions of section 2-8(c), the city council or the school committee shall act with respect to each initiative petition by passing it without change, by passing a measure which is stated to be in lieu of an initiative measure, or by rejecting it. The passage of a measure which is in lieu of the initiative measure shall be deemed to be a rejection of the initiative measure. If, at the expiration of the said thirty days the city council or the school committee has not voted on such petition, no other business of said council or committee shall be in order or lawfully acted upon until a vote to approve of the measure, to disapprove of the measure, or to adopt some other measure in lieu thereof, has been taken.

(d)

Supplementary Petitions - Within forty-five days following the date an initiative petition has been rejected, a supplemental initiative petition may be filed with the clerk of the council or the secretary of the school committee. The supplemental initiative petition shall be signed by a number of additional voters which is equal to five percent of the total number of voters as of the date of the most recent city election. If the number of signatures to such supplemental petition is found to be sufficient by the board of election commissioners, the city council shall call a special election to be held on a date fixed by it not less than thirty nor more than forty-five days following the date of the certificate of the board of election commissioners that a sufficient number of voters have signed the supplemental initiative petition, and shall submit the proposed measure, without alteration, to the voters for determination; provided, however, if any other city election is to be held within one-hundred-twenty days following the date of the said certificate, the city council may omit the calling of such special election and cause said question to appear on the election ballot at such approaching election for determination by the voters.

(e)

Publication - The full text of any initiative measure which is submitted to the voters shall be published in a local newspaper not less than seven nor more than fourteen days preceding the date of the election at which such question is to be voted upon. Additional copies of the full text shall be available for distribution to the public in the office of the board of election commissioners.

(f)

Form of Question - The ballots used when voting on a measure proposed by the voters under this section shall contain a question in substantially the following form:

Shall the following measure which was proposed by voters in an initiative petition take effect?  
(Here insert the full text of the proposed measure, or a fair, concise summary, as determined and prepared by the city attorney, in consultation with the city clerk.)

YES \_\_\_\_\_

NO \_\_\_\_\_

(g)

Time of Taking Effect - If a majority of the votes cast on the question is in the affirmative, the measure shall be deemed to be effective forthwith, unless a later date is specified in such measure; provided, however, that no such measure shall be deemed to be adopted if fewer than twenty percent of the total number of voters of the city, as of the date of the most recent city election, participate at such election.

### III. Citizen Referendum

**Overview:** process for requesting that the legislative body (city council or school committee) reconsider action on a measure, including signature requirements and other protocols provided above in section 8-2. Also includes submission to voters via ballot at special election or regular election.

Decision Points:

- Timeframe after a measure has been passed to collect signatures [ie. 20/30 days]
- Number of signatures [a percentage , 15%, of total voters from last municipal election]

Sample Language:

#### Watertown

Petition, Effect on Final Vote - If, within twenty days following the date on which the city council or the school committee has voted finally to approve of any measure, a petition signed by a number of voters equal to fifteen percent of the total number of voters as of the date of the most recent city election and addressed to the city council or to the school committee, as the case may be, against the measure or any part thereof is filed with the secretary of the school committee or clerk of the council, the effective date of such measure shall be temporarily suspended. The school committee or the city council shall forthwith reconsider its vote on such measure or part thereof, and, if such measure is not rescinded the city council shall provide for the submission of the question for a determination by the voters either at a special election which it may call at its convenience, or within such time as may be requested by the school committee, or at the next regular city election, but pending such submission and determination the effect of such measure shall continue to be suspended.

(b)

Certain Initiative Provisions to Apply - The petition described in this section shall be termed a referendum petition and insofar as applicable, Section 7-9 (a), (b) and (e) shall apply to such referendum petitions, except that the words "measure or part thereof protested against" shall be deemed to replace the word "measure" in said sections wherever it may occur and the word "referendum" shall be deemed to replace the word "initiative" wherever it may occur in said sections.

Form of Question - The question that shall appear on the ballot shall take the following form:

Shall the following measure enacted by the Town Council take effect?

(Here insert the full text of the proposed measure, or a fair, concise summary of the measure, as determined and prepared by the city attorney in consultation with the city clerk)

YES \_\_\_\_\_

NO \_\_\_\_\_

## **I. Include a Public Engagement Article of Charter**

**Overview:** Include a new article in the charter that is a statement of overall public engagement goals and standards. Can include language about general communications. Should include a statement of principles for public engagement. This is a new section that not many cities have implemented in their charters, there aren't any other examples.

### [Model City Charter](#) - Public Engagement Sample Section

- Introduction - Statement
- Public Engagement and Civic Infrastructure
- Structures, commissions or departments to support engagement
- Statement of Principles of public engagement
  - Equity
  - Accountability
  - Transparency
  - Accessibility
  - Collaboration
  - Evaluation



## II. Include Resident Assembly in the Public Engagement Article

### Reference Article - [Linked Here](#)

*“Such a group does not have to be big. It may include 50 or 100 persons. It can be larger when the topic of the assembly is, e.g., changes in the constitution. Its size depends on the size of the city or the country, as well as on the organizational capabilities. It is crucial that the group be considered representative; it should inspire trust and take into consideration a variety of perspectives and life experiences.*

*That group will for the following days listen to presentations by experts, representatives of authorities, NGOs and other groups with an interest or expertise in the topic. They will read expert analyses and comments sent by other residents who were not selected to the assembly by lot. Their role is to study a given topic in depth and consider which solutions will be most favourable from the perspective of the common good.”*

### Drafted Language (sample):

- A. Statement of Purpose/Goal: Each year city council shall initiate, with the support of the city manager and city staff, a resident assembly to assist in the development of recommendations for new policies or programs in relation to one city council city wide goal. The city shall provide for adequate education and support required to ensure assembly members are given the tools needed to have productive discussions. The city may allow for relevant city stakeholders, institutions, community-based organizations, faith groups, grassroots orgs, etc to assist in the development of education and supporting assembly discussions. Assembly will discuss and make an advisory recommendation to city council and city manager on the chosen topic.
- B. Composition and Appointment - Random selection of at least [50] Cambridge residents. City shall invite a random selection of residents (with attention to selecting a diverse set of individuals based on race, neighborhood, age, language, education, and other social factors) who can opt into serving on the assembly.
- C. Other - City shall provide a stipend to compensate individuals serving as well as providing child care services. City shall clearly advertise the required time commitment, goals for the assembly and compensation. Potential assembly format: 4 day commitment (4 Saturdays). Two days focused on education and background information on the topic, one day on proposal development, one day on voting.

### III. Include a Public Engagement Commission in Public Engagement Article

- D. Statement of Purpose: Collaborate with city staff to guide public engagement activities and policies, develop recommendations to improve community engagement practices, and provide advice and recommendations to the City Manager, the city council, and boards and commissions. Provide advice and assistance with recruitment for boards and commissions. Provide recommendation and guidance on evaluation criteria and results in collaboration with the public engagement staff to review and continually improve engagement practices and policies. Demystify city operations, powers and role of different city leaders, etc. This commission is supported by City Managers office.
- E. Composition and Appointment - shall be made up of 9-15 Cambridge residents(?), Appointed by city manager, confirmed by city council (per charter)

Referenced in Model City Charter - [Document link](#).

Other Examples:

[NYC Charter Chapter 70 - City Government in the Community](#) - has a much broader scope than what we discussed but is an interesting reference point

- Also check out Chapter [76 Civic Engagement Commission](#)