

**DEKALB COUNTY CHARTER REVIEW COMMISSION**

**MALOOF AUDITORIUM**

**NOVEMBER 9, 2023**

**PUBLIC HEARING – DISTRICT 3**

**MINUTES**

**I. CALL TO ORDER** 6:00 p.m.

**II. ROLL CALL**

Steve Henson, Chair

Virginia Harris, Vice Chair

Claudette Leak

Mary Hinkel

Lance Hammonds

Robert Wittenstein

Susan Neugent

Jim Grubiak

Vickie Turner

Dwight Thomas

Chairman Henson – I am introducing the members of the Charter Review Commission and would like them to introduce themselves and note who appointed them.

(Commissioner) Robert Wittenstein - I was appointed by Commissioner Robert Patrick

(Commissioner) Virginia Harris – I was appointed by CEO Michael Thurmond.

(Commissioner) Steve Henson – I was appointed by CEO Michael Thurmond.

(Commissioner) Mary Hinkel – I was appointed by the House Delegation.

(Commissioner) Claudette Leak – I was appointed by the House Delegation.

(Commissioner) Susan Neugent – I was appointed by Commissioner Michelle Long-Spears

(Commissioner) Jim Grubiak – I was appointed by Commissioner Ted Terry

(Commissioner) Dwight Thomas – I was appointed by Commissioner Lorraine Cochran-Johnson

**III. REPORT FROM CHAIR**

Chairman Henson - We were appointed as a Commission to look at the Charter, or the Organizational Act as it's referred to, which is the structure for how County Government operates, and we were asked by CEO Michael Thurmond through an order that he had to study the government structure and see how it can best serve the citizens of DeKalb County commission. The County Commission supported this effort, putting some money into making sure that we had staff from the Carl Vinson Institute, and to make sure we were working properly. He also appointed Zach Williams, the COO or the Executive Assistant of

county government, to assist us. Mr. Williams, we appreciate you being here today. We've also had support from other county staff when we needed it.

Since April 2022, when he first asked me to serve, at the organizational meeting in June we elected Ms. Hinkel as secretary, and we started reviewing the Charter, so we understood the Charter before we took any action. For several months we went over the existing county Organizational Act to make sure we understood what it did and what it encompassed. Over the last few months, we've tried to go over sections and look at where we thought changes might be appropriate. We were trying to get a situation where we had a consensus or some strong opinion from us of any needed changes. It takes 10 votes of the Charter Review Commission members to make recommendations for change and what we do has to go to the legislative delegation - the DeKalb County House and Senate members – who will have to review the recommendations from the CEO and Commissioners on whether or not to take action and then they would have to actually pass legislation. That legislation would then come before the voters of DeKalb County to make any amendments or changes. We're making recommendations and bringing up issues. The final decider will be the citizens of DeKalb County after the DeKalb County legislative delegation acts.

We've looked at some of the major issues in county government. Some we've decided not to act on. For example, we looked at the numbers of commissioners and we decided and are presenting that the number remains unchanged for both the single district and super district commissioners. We looked at things like the county budget. Right now, the budget is adopted around March, although the budget year starts in January, so we are recommending a change that they try to get the budget approved before the new budget year starts. Also, some things conflict with state law. For instance, in the Charter or the Organizational Act it says you have to be 30 years old to run for CEO, but state law says 21, so we thought that should be changed to reflect what's really in state law because that supersedes what's in the Charter. Same thing with county commissioners - it says 25 years old, but state law says 21. It says you must live in the district for two years, while state law says one year. So, we're making sure that the Organizational Act conforms to state law. We're making sure areas that can be improved or you know strengthened are being looked at and we've had several recommendations, including one of the recommendations that there'll be a study Commission every few years to continue looking at the Charter to make sure it's appropriate and being updated. So, those are some points about the charter that we addressed. I don't want to take up your time; this is a time for you to come and tell us what your thoughts are. Speakers will have 3 minutes to present what they want. If we have abundance of time I might let that go on a little longer. It doesn't look like a tremendous crowd of speakers, but we are at the end of our journey. Again, we've been doing this for close to a year and a half and you know we've already kind of voted on our major recommendations, but we will have a couple more meetings as we wrap up and one of those will be another public hearing in the first Commission district. So, thank you all for being here tonight and with that we will open the public hearing. We are here to see if any of you have any comments or complaints about the county. Specific things on the charter would certainly be appreciated, but anything that you think we should know, we would be willing to welcome your input.

#### **IV. PUBLIC SPEAKERS**

Former CEO Ellis - Thank you I didn't necessarily want to be the first person to speak tonight, but I first of all wanted to say thank you to the members of the Commission for your hard work and your effort. I had a little bit more time to look through some of the changes and it's obvious that you put a lot of time

and effort into this and I want you to know it's appreciated. I also want to let you know that you gave me a courtesy allowing me to go before the public comment when I came to the meeting last time. I appreciate that. I was with my son who's a freshman in college. He was home for his first time on fall break and I wanted to make sure that I was able to spend some time with him during the couple of days he was here. So, I wasn't able to stay for the entire meeting. It sounds like maybe it won't be a lengthy meeting today and I'm going to try to stay for the entire thing. Listen, that's most of my comments because I wanted to make sure that I thanked you for everything you do for our county, and I wanted to make sure I thanked you for the time and courtesy that you extended to me last time.

I do want to reiterate a couple points though that I made last time. First, I think it is critical that this committee and I heard Mr. Chairman say you're about to wrap up, but I do think it is critical that you hear from all the former elected CEO's before making a recommendation and I emphasize the words "former and elected" for a couple of reasons: "elected" because if you run for this office, you run county wide and as you know this is a very diverse county and people hold a variety of different opinions from different backgrounds. Someone who's run county wide in the unique kind of campaign you must do to get elected to become CEO has some perspective - a unique one, I think, and then you must go out and govern behind that. And so, I think that talking to each of us, I don't know that we would all say the same thing. I kind of doubt that we would - we're very different and independent individuals, but I do think it is a perspective that should be valued. I also say "former" because when you're in the office sometimes you're just trying to keep your head above water, but after you've left the office you have an opportunity to look back and to reflect, and you think about some things that are, quite frankly, I think good for the county, that other people may not necessarily see who haven't sat in that seat. So, I want to encourage that and offer that again. And the other thing I want to say is that I hope you'll take seriously my comment about the provision that would give the Commission investigatory subpoena powers. Think about what's already in the Org Act. We already have an independent auditor, we already have the District Attorney who can do reports on civil matters, and we already have audit power under the executive branch. I am concerned and I think one of your key functions here is to make sure that we get this thing so it operates better and so the government can be smoother, and I'm concerned that you'll have so many people investigating things that can already be investigated now that it could possibly cause conflict and shut down the government, and we don't want to see that happen. If I were invited to share my thoughts in a more detailed manner, I'd like to talk about that a little bit more and some other things but let me close by just saying thank you. Once again, I appreciate my time to speak tonight. Thank you.

Jocelyn O'Neil - I am Jocelyn O'Neil with Greater Towers Community. There are several things that I have brought before you and I'm not sure about just all you can do, but my major concern is that the major companies that we have working - our DeKalb County government contractors - are much more respectful to what we need done in our communities. I've had to walk in on a few contractors that were working in my community and I was seeing some not so good things happening. I reported it to our local commissioners but didn't get any results, so I just went into their office anyway, but they're very disrespectful. Some of the things that they come in and are supposed to be repairing and doing. I'm not sure just what all you can all can do about it but if these things go to our local commissioners for them to make policies and rules - they really should consider that when the constituents are complaining about things not being done or that need to be done that these complaints are actually looked into. You know we have roads that are poorly repaired. We have companies coming in to fix things that the people we

pay for those who might be state might be local, but that they take really a good hard look since they are our policymakers that they look at what's going on in the communities. Thank you.

Hannah Hawkins – My name is Hannah Hawkins and I'm just a regular person. I've been living in DeKalb most of my life and I think of myself as a relatively informed person and I try to do a lot of research for local elections. However I've still ended up voting for a lot of people in DeKalb including DeKalb CEO's who have turned out to be corrupt and even in the case of Vernon Jones who end up being thieves and rapists. So, this is very shocking for me, and I am tired of doing this. I think that something is kind of rotten with the system and the way that this system is run seems to encourage this kind of abuse of power that has been going on over decades. I strongly support increasing the power of the commissioners and especially so that the people in South Dekalb can be better represented. I think the situation in South Dekalb, which is where I live, is sad and we have almost no representation in terms of power and in terms of the current CEO. The best thing I can say that he has been better than past CEO's but that's with a very low bar and the leadership especially in cop's city has been incredibly bad. I would have liked to see more conflict. I would have liked to see somebody pushing back and saying why do we need to bulldoze all of this green space in South DeKalb to put up the playground for military style home invasions. I mean if the Atlanta PD wants to do that, why don't they do it at a golf course in Buckhead? Why do they have to come to South Dekalb and why are we in South Dekalb not giving any input on these choices? Perhaps if we had had a CEO or any kind of structure who would push back more strongly against this then a young person would not have been murdered there by and then a cover up attempted by the GBI. So that is my opinion on this: I am for any change that would give more representation to the people of South DeKalb and less representation to the monied and corporate interests who are very well represented in the past and in the present, but hopefully not so well in the future. Thank you very much.

Stephen Binney – I am Stephen Binney, Clarkston GA. I would like to comment on Mr. Ellis' comment. You're free to talk to previous CEO's, but I would like to caution you that they come with a vested interest and to take what they say perhaps with a grain of salt. I agree with the previous speaker. I don't want Vernon Jones anywhere near anything we have to do with the new Charter. I am encouraged though by some of the organizational changes you are proposing to the County Commission and the DeKalb Legislative delegation. Moving the budget process dates up to have the yearly budget ready to go by the start of the year, along with granting subpoena powers to the Commission, are more positive steps towards equalizing the power structure in our county but fall short from of the reforms and changes that are needed to help DeKalb County be the best it can be for all citizens in the future. However, a 70% bar of approval for any change to be recommended is a high level and I am pleasantly surprised that any significant recommendations came out of this process, and I thank all of you for your efforts and participation.

There is one last area that would encourage this board to investigate involving the designation of the "official newspaper of record." That is one that needs to be looked at. How much transparency and communication should DeKalb County provide to its citizens? Hopefully more than it currently does. The charter review process is where decisions affecting this transparency can and must be made. Transparency and communication are two-way streets. The citizens have a responsibility to search out

the information and provide feedback to the county. On the flip side, it is the County's responsibility and job to provide easy access to this information.

Currently the official newspaper of record for DeKalb County is The Champion. It is published once a week I believe and has a little over 40,000 subscribers in a county of nearly 800,000 residents. The Champion is a fine newspaper, but its reach is limited. When commissioners posted the legal notices that they were going to raise their pay by over 60% in The Champion but nowhere else, they were able to walk it on and pass it without public input because the public was not aware of the pay raise.

I do not believe it is against the law to have more than one official newspaper of record for DeKalb, so there's no reason the county could not post these legal notices in other local newspapers and sites if instructed in the new Charter. I am a big proponent of local and neighborhood news organizations and publishing these notices with papers and websites in Tucker, Dunwoody, Stonecrest, or even in organizations like Decaturish will not only DeKalb County's legal notices to be seen more easily by more people but will also end up getting more public input on proposed county changes.

As a bonus the increased revenue to these other news organizations could help to expand their own local news coverage and encourage them to take a deeper interest in what is going on throughout our DeKalb county government. Information is power and currently not enough information is being provided by the county to enable the public to exercise their power to form opinions or to effect change.

Governmental authorities sometimes fail to realize the full benefits of public engagement when they do it on a piecemeal or occasional basis. Public engagement will be more effective and efficient if it is treated as a part of the normal governing process.

Thank you very much.

Chairman Henson - Thank you very much. And while anybody else is thinking, I want to introduce Commissioner Larry Johnson. In my years in the legislature, I often had Mr. Johnson come down and advocate for his constituents and champion issues down at the state capitol. We appreciate you being here today and taking time from your busy schedule. Also, Commissioner Mereda Davis Johnson is here today. We appreciate you both for being here today. You're welcome to speak but we appreciate the fact that you're here and present with us today. Thank you. I deeply appreciate it. The Charter Review Commission will be meeting again, either this month or probably in December, so please look to our county web page to see when and where they will be. We hope you will attend every meeting we have pursuant to the CEO's instructions. We have had comments from the public whenever we've met and we appreciate that.

So, hearing nothing more, this public hearing is adjourned and thank you so much for your time and our secretary Mrs. Hinkel will be in touch with you to talk about a future meeting.

Thank you.

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Steve Henson, Chaiman

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Barbara Sanders-Norwood, County Clerk