

HardisonInk.com

Fanning Springs may consider starting workshops to revise its current city charter

By Jeff M. Hardison © Dec. 14, 2016 at 3:27 p.m.

FANNING SPRINGS –Some of the Fanning Springs City Council members believe the city charter can be improved, according to what was said at the Tuesday night (Dec. 13 meeting).

However, now employing a law firm that charges \$200 to \$225 an hour, one of the city's current leaders believes the taxpayers cannot afford to even look at revisions.

Fanning Springs City Attorney David M. Delaney, a partner in the firm named Dell Graham, P.A., of Gainesville, was the attorney helping city leaders that night understand the ideas of revising the charter.

The Town of Bronson went through a process to amend its charter.

In six ballot questions decided in regard to the Bronson Charter in 2015, the voters rejected three of the amendments and they accepted three of the amendments. Therefore, the time, money and resources spent to help improve that town's founding document was 50-50 as far as those town voters wanted.

The Fanning Springs City Charter may be in worse shape than Bronson's charter was.

The Fanning Springs Charter is 17 pages, of single-sided eight and one-half inches by 11 inches.

To have a paper copy, according to the number of pages and what was said Tuesday night (Dec. 13) in the Fanning Springs City Council meeting, costs \$2.55 at 15-cents-per-page for a paper copy.

Fanning Springs Mayor Howell "Trip" Lancaster III offered to pay for one resident's copy of the charter when she said she does not have Internet access, and refused to go to any public library, where there is free use of computers to see things on the Internet.

The city leaders said they plan to put the charter on the city's website to let people look at it so the people can suggest revisions.

The 1977 ordinance leading to the creation of the City of Fanning Springs shows the city was first named the City of Suwannee River.

One possible change was an amendment to change from the terms "chairman" and "vice-chairman" (and perhaps not needlessly hyphenated) to something less male gender-specific like "chair" and "vice chair."

The City Council could propose, too, to completely scrap the strong mayor form of government. The voters in Fanning Springs could adopt a whole new form of government where the City Council hires a city manager, who answers to them.

So far, no person has proposed that idea.

However, before the City Council creates a proposal for revisions, it wants input from the city residents.

Nothing is happening, too, until the next two City Council members are in office.

Elected City Councilwoman Jennifer (Padot) Morris (Seat #2) will be replacing outgoing Councilwoman Jane Nogaki (Seat #2).

Elected City Councilman John Thomas McDonald (Seat #5) will be replacing outgoing Chairman Paul Chase (Seat #5).

The other three Fanning Springs City Council members are City Council member (Seat #1) Thomas "Tommy" Darus III, City Councilwoman Barbara Locke (Seat #3) and City Councilman Ron Queen (Seat #4).

HardisonInk.com

Darus said to change the City Charter should involve citizen review groups.

“It is a long, lengthy, expensive process,” Darus said.

Locke said she welcomes public input as the charter is improved to best serve the residents and visitors of Fanning Springs today, versus the outdated version that shows the city’s name as being the City of Suwanee River.

Councilman Queen said he wants the people of Fanning Springs to look at the charter and provide input to the City Council members as they go into workshops to attempt to propose revisions for the electors to choose to accept or reject.

Attorney Delaney said the law firm sees public workshops where the City Council brings points that need to be improved upon to the forefront as a starting point.

Mayor Lancaster said Morris and McDonald are scheduled to be administered the oath of office on Jan. 10. That meeting starts at 5 p.m.

McDonald spoke from his seat in the audience that night and said he feels like he needs time to know what he is doing as a City Council member. Locke said that if the first workshop was on Jan. 18, then he would have a whole week to get his feet on the ground as a member.

Darus said he is not a retiree and his job requires him to be somewhere on Jan. 18 during the day.

“If we’re going to head down this path,” Darus said as he continued his objection to the idea, “we’re going to spend a lot of money.”

Darus pointed out that workshops and public hearings or special meetings, as well as the regular meetings, are times when the city taxpayers must pay for the hourly services of the Dell Graham, P.A., law firm of Gainesville. And the taxpayers pay for travel time.

Darus said a general charter review is not worthy of the expense. If there are specific issues, then he is more inclined to seek revisions.

One person who spoke from a seat in the audience and did not identify herself for the record said that the people should be allowed to review the charter and suggest possible changes. She mentioned the expenditure of \$30,000 by the city in 2016 just to see that the mayor was incorrect in his interpretation of a law.

After a little more discussion, including input from the audience without going to the podium and with no timeclock started, the City Council chose to ask City Clerk Sheila Watson to put the matter on the agenda for discussion on Jan. 10.

While some towns and cities require all speakers to identify themselves, and to speak from a podium, and are limited to a certain amount of time for comments, during the Tuesday night meeting there was only one person who was required to do that after she ranted toward the mayor and City Council for a while from her seat in the audience.