

THE TOWN OF EASTON—A TIME FOR CHANGE

The Town of Easton's Charter assigns the Office of the Mayor full authority and discretion for administering the Town's finances. This authority is subject to final approval by the Council but with no stated requirement for consultation with Council members or Easton residents prior to public announcement and submission by the Mayor to the Town Council for approval.

Easton's Charter thereby creates an environment in which elected officials make financial decisions without disclosure, discussion, input, and participation by those who may be most affected – the Easton taxpayer. The Talbot County Taxpayers Association (TCTA) has focused its attention on a most recent decision involving the Mayor and Town Council and has documented an important need for change to the Charter.

The Town of Easton has borrowed \$9.95 million dollars, in a time of general economic uncertainty, for expanding and updating existing Public Safety facilities and for the purchase of private property to relocate the Town's Public Works Department. Little or no information was provided to taxpayers in Easton regarding these initiatives until they were made available to the Town Council. This was well after the Mayor, the bond underwriter, and property seller established and agreed to each of the contract provisions. It appears, although information provided to TCTA is incomplete, that much of the planning was done solely by the Mayor and his immediate staff. It also appears, from information provided by the Town to TCTA, that little to no substantive input from Council members or Easton's residents was sought before this plan was submitted to the Council for approval.

Based on the initial request by TCTA for information about recent borrowing and a less-than-adequate response by the Town, TCTA has made a second formal request for information regarding future financial planning by the Town and whether projected revenues will support planned expenditures. TCTA is very interested in knowing what assumptions Town officials used to make those projections and if their planning included consideration of today's economic conditions. The response to this request is pending.

TCTA believes there should be an amendment to the Town's Charter requiring more openness with respect to the Mayor's role in financial planning, particularly for major expenditures or projects, as well as planning involving significant, future expenditures. While TCTA will make a proposal to the Council for such a change, if the Council declines TCTA's initiative Easton voters should undertake a petition process, as provided for in Easton's Charter, to require such a change.

These matters need the support of Easton's voters. The present lack of openness, transparency, and accountability during the Mayor's financial planning processes is a significant issue. Support for change must, ultimately, come from Easton's residents – whose tax dollars are being spent and for whom – today – there is little to no visibility into such expenditures until well into the decision/approval process.

Owen Wormser
President
Talbot County Taxpayers Association