

Difference Between a Town and City

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October 3, 2022 | 2022-R-0193

Issue

In Connecticut, what is the difference between a town and city? If a town would like to convert to a city, must the General Assembly make the change via legislative action?

The Office of Legislative Research is not authorized to give legal opinions and this report should not be considered one.

Summary

There are no statutory rules dictating when a municipality is a “town” or a “city.” It appears that a town can act locally to change itself to a city. The [last city](#) to be incorporated in Connecticut was Groton, in 1964, under the Home Rule Act.

Lack of Consistency in the Use of Terms

In Connecticut, the terms “town” and “city” do not necessarily correspond to a municipality’s size, form of government, or governmental powers. As explained in a UConn Institute of Public Service publication “Forms of Town and City Government in Connecticut” (1978) (p. 2):

The title “city” in Connecticut is largely a result of history— the history of the city as a center of industry and commerce and of urban living and governed by a mayor and a board of aldermen, a history which they have in common with other cities across America. The title city certainly does not derive solely from population...[n]or can towns and cities be differentiated on the basis of form of government. While most of the cities have a mayor-council government in the traditional style of large American cities, some of the larger towns

have adopted this form as well... Nor is the selectman-town meeting form strictly the province of small towns... [I]f a distinction of any significance is to be made between towns and cities in Connecticut, it must be made on the basis of governmental powers granted by the state. All towns in Connecticut have the power of home rule, the power to write and adopt their own charter...The home rule law [...] does grant some powers not available to non-charter towns under the General Statutes. Further, the General Assembly in enacting special act charters prior to home rule may have granted some additional powers to these towns and cities; but special act charters were enacted for towns as well as cities. The distinction based on governmental powers, therefore, is between the towns and cities with charters and the towns still operating under the General Statutes.

Changing From a Town to City

It appears that towns may rename themselves “cities” without the General Assembly’s involvement. In 1961, voters in West Haven voted at referendum to convert from a town with a representative town meeting form of government to a city with a mayor-council form (see Attachment 1). Additionally, Attachment 2 is a 1964 article on Groton’s vote to change from a borough to a city (the measure passed, in a vote of 860 to 468).

Legislative Action

The legislature has in the past, by special act, made towns into cities. In some cases, this was part of a town and city consolidation (i.e., the consolidation of two local governments, one of which operated in a city wholly contained within the town). But we have not found any recent examples of legislation converting a town to a city.

One older example that we found, from 1959 concerning Milford, predates the enactment of the [Home Rule Act](#) (1957) and constitutional provision [Article Tenth](#) (1965). Prior to the passage of the Home Rule Act, a municipality could generally only take actions that were specifically allowed by statute or a special act that the legislature passed on the municipality’s behalf. Article Tenth limits the ability of the legislature to enact special legislation concerning any individual town, city, or borough’s powers, organization, terms of elective office, or form of government.

Attachment 1

West Haven Now a City

The Hartford Courant (1923-); Jun 28, 1961; ProQuest Historical Newspapers: Hartford Courant
pg. 1A

West Haven Now a City

WEST HAVEN (AP)—West Haven voters voted Tuesday to adopt a city form of government with a mayor and council as the governing body.

At present, the town has a representative town meeting and three selectmen.

The vote at the referendum was 5,492 in favor of the city charter proposal and 1,121 against.

West Haven will elect its first mayor and 13 councilmen in November and they will take office Jan. 1, 1962.

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Attachment 2

Groton: 'City' Slated for Vote; Change Is Only Symbol
Special
The Hartford Courant (1923-); May 4, 1964; ProQuest Historical Newspapers: Hartford Courant
pg. 6D

Groton

'City' Slated for Vote; Change Is Only Symbol

GROTON (Special) — A four-letter status symbol that means little and that no one seems to care much about will be decided on by borough voters in today's annual elections.

The four-letter word is "city" and a question on the ballot asks freemen if they want the borough to still be called by that ancient title or to be known as "The City of Groton." Uninterested

When public hearings were held on the matter several months ago, only a handful of freemen attended and none seemed to be much concerned.

Actually, the proposed change will mean nothing so far as the borough administration is concerned.

The Board of Warden and Burgesses may become a mayor and city council but the borough will still be operated in the same manner.

Added Prestige

The charter revision committee as well as some members of the warden and burgesses recommended the change as a means of giving the commun-

ity added prestige and as a preliminary for expected growth.

If voters approve the move, the change will become effective immediately.

The City of Groton will be part of the town of Groton — a situation which opponents of the move have called confusing.

The town last year also considered becoming a "city" but the council turned down the suggestion.

Sidewalk Issue

Also on today's ballot is an issue that has stirred up more controversy than the name change, even if the excitement was centered in one neighborhood.

Freemen will vote on construction of a sidewalk on the south side of Godfrey Street.

When the sidewalk was first proposed, some property owners petitioned construction be called off. This was followed by another petition from Godfrey Street residents asking the sidewalk be built.

To settle the issue, the bor-

ough government decided to let the voters decide.

Neither the name change or the sidewalk argument was an issue in the pre-election campaign.

14-Hour Vote

Polls today will open at 8 a.m. and close at 8 p.m.

Voters who live on the south side of Poquonnock Road will vote at Eastern Point School. Those on the north side will cast ballots at Groton Heights School.

Seeking election are:

For warden — Robert A. Toher (D) and Frank Pisapia (R).

For two burgess seats — Paul C. Van Dyke and F. Keith Burgess (D), and Wesley A. Cook and William F. Hart (R).

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