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## News

# Saratoga Springs mayoral candidates Scott Johnson and Brent Wilkes weigh in on charter change (**with video**)

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SARATOGA SPRINGS — The Saratogian’s editorial board this week sat down with candidates running for city offices, asking them each specific questions related to city issues.

One of those questions was “Do you support charter change?”

Below is what the two mayoral candidates had to say about potentially reforming the current council form of government; a referendum was proposed this year but was not placed on the ballot for the Nov. 8 election.

Look for answers to this question from the candidates for other city offices in Monday’s paper.

Leading up to the election, these and other candidates’ answers to questions from the editorial board interviews will be printed. Video of the interviews will also appear at [www.saratogian.com/video](http://www.saratogian.com/video).

### **Scott Johnson**

*Incumbent, running on the Republican, Independence and Conservative lines*

“When I took office back in 2008, I took an oath. My oath is to do what I can do to best protect the city. I view that as a very important oath, and I must decide in my own mind what I think is the best course of action to the city disregarding any special interests that may develop.

Charter change, as I view it now, is a special interest.

My obligation to the city is more fiscal than anything else, and because of that, I have had to take a position on the charter reform proposal that may not be popular with everybody. But when we have a movement to change the very form of our government that is so fundamental that it affects how we would operate our government each and every day, I take that obligation very seriously.

I have not come out publicly to say whether I am for or against the change. That’s not my job. My job is to do for the city what right now I think is the best course of action.

There are certain things that can be done now that could be more efficient. When this issue of the Saratoga Citizen

proposal is put to rest — whether it goes forward or not — I am fully agreeable to start a charter commission to review our current form of government, its strengths, its weaknesses and a proposal for a revision to that, as well as considering maybe changing the form of government. But that is a more inclusive process; people in City Hall who have lived under this form of government would be on the commission — people from the community.

... I do believe any form of government, whether it's a commission form, a strong-mayor form or a city manager form, none of it works unless you have the right personalities in office. Everything is personality-dependent. ... You aren't going to get away from politics because you have a city manager who is employed by the city rather than elected by Saratogians.

You still have a City Council under that format who can hire or fire a city manager at will. And the City Council will be elected, of course, by the community.

... Is it more efficient — who knows? It could be. I think our city, given its size, is right on the edge, but certainly I want to address the issue. I could have appointed a charter commission in my four years in office and stopped this movement in its tracks. I have authority to do that under the charter.

[Saratoga Citizen] is a citizen-based group. I wanted to let them have their day. If I were trying to suppress voters — as now the allegation is against me — I would have formed that commission long ago and stopped this movement in its tracks. I have not done that. I allowed it to proceed to see what they offered the community. But I think their offering is deficient.”

### **Brent Wilkes**

*Challenger, running on the Democratic line*

“The right of a grassroots group of people to bring change to a form of government is founded in the deepest roots of democracy. There are people in other parts of the world who are fighting and dying for these values. To suppress this vote on technicalities ... it's wrong legally, and it's just wrong morally.

Two-thousand-three-hundred people signed that petition. They want it on, and state law says you only need 1,500. It's a travesty it isn't on the ballot, and it is a waste of taxpayers' money.

In two sentences, we're talking about proposed charter that would introduce a council-manager form of government, and it would turn the City Council into a legislative body, a policy-making body, instead of a policy/administrative body.

The first thing it does is enfranchise more people to run for office. There are so many people who will not run for office because they don't want the added administrative responsibilities. So we would get a lot more citizen participation in government if we get a City Council that is a legislative body.

The second thing is, it would bring in a more professional capacity to be able to provide the viewpoint, the tools and the process to get things done. We are so comfortable in the county having a professional school superintendent managing the school district and a professional county administrator managing the county I don't know why we struggle with applying that same principle to the city.

This charter is not going to cost money, it is going to save money. The only argument to have is how much it is going to save, and it's an academic argument because we're not going to know until it's been in place for five years.”