

Understanding Hazleton's Proposed Home Rule Charter

A Citizen's Guide to The Charter

Prepared by the Hazleton City Government Study Commission

This guide explains, in everyday language, what each article of the draft Home Rule Charter does. It is intended to help residents quickly understand the structure and purpose of the proposed charter without needing to read the full text. For the complete, legally binding language, please refer to the full draft charter document.

Preamble

The Preamble explains why the people of Hazleton are adopting this Charter: to secure the fullest measure of local self-government allowed under Pennsylvania law, and to create a City government that is responsive, accountable, transparent, efficient, and fiscally responsible. It commits the City to ethical leadership, separation of legislative and executive power, and a government that serves the public interest.

Article I: General Powers

Establishes the legal foundation for Hazleton as a home rule municipality under Pennsylvania's Home Rule Charter and Optional Plans Law. It confirms the City's boundaries, grants the City broad authority to govern itself in all matters not prohibited by federal or state law, allows the City to work cooperatively with other governments, sets English as the language of official City business (while permitting translation services), and directs the City to protect the residential character of its neighborhoods.

Article II: City Council

Creates a five-member City Council elected at large to four-year staggered terms, and sets out the qualifications, oath of office, and required orientation for Council members. It establishes rules for organizing Council, appointing a Clerk of Council, requires a three-member quorum, prohibits council members from holding other public offices, how a Council member can forfeit office or how a vacancy can be filled, Councilmember compensation, and the procedures Council must follow for meetings, votes, and record-keeping.

Article III: Mayor

Establishes an elected Mayor as the City's Chief Executive Officer, holding executive, administrative, and law-enforcement authority. It sets qualifications (including a two-year residency requirement and minimum age of 25), a four-year term, an oath and orientation requirement, prohibitions on holding other offices, how the Mayor can forfeit office and how a vacancy can be filled, compensation, and a detailed list of powers and duties — including preparing the budget, appointing and supervising City directors and staff, vetoing ordinances, declaring emergencies, and representing the City in intergovernmental matters.

Article IV: Office of Law

Creates the Office of Law, headed by a City Solicitor who serves as the City's chief legal advisor. The Solicitor must be a Pennsylvania-licensed attorney experienced in municipal law, recommended for appointment by the Mayor with Council's consent and approval, and is responsible for representing the City in legal matters, reviewing contracts, overseeing litigation, providing legal opinions to the Mayor and

Council, and owes the highest duties of loyalty, independent judgment, and professional responsibility to the City. Council may also appoint assistant solicitors or special outside counsel as needed.

Article V: Appointed Officials

Creates a professional administrative structure led by a Chief Administrative Director, who oversees Administrative Directors of Business and Finance, Public Safety, Public Service, and Public Works. These positions are filled based on relevant education, training, and experience, not political affiliation, with the Mayor nominating and Council confirming appointments. The article also sets out powers and duties of Directors, procedures for vacancies, removal, and the duties of the Clerk of Council as the administrative officer supporting Council.

Article VI: Ordinances and Resolutions

Sets out how the City makes laws. Major legislative actions such as adopting budgets, establishing departments, or setting fees and rates must be done by ordinance, which requires two public readings, public notice, and a roll-call vote, with at least seven days between introduction and final passage. Lesser matters may be handled by resolution or motion. The article also covers emergency ordinances for urgent situations and the Mayor's authority to veto ordinances, subject to Council's ability to override with a supermajority vote.

Article VII: Budget and Finance

Governs how the City plans and manages its money. It requires the Mayor to submit a balanced annual budget along with a budget message each fall, with public notice and hearings before Council adopts it by December 10. It limits growth in overall General Fund tax revenue to no more than 7% per year, absent a Council override for extraordinary circumstances, and provides a homestead exemption to encourage home ownership. The article provides for a multi-year capital improvement program, mid-year and monthly financial reporting to keep the public informed, a Homestead residential tax relief provision and allows funding for historic preservation of the City's heritage.

Article VIII: Contracts

Divides authority over City contracts between the Mayor and Council. The Mayor may negotiate and sign routine, budgeted contracts, employee agreements, and professional service agreements, while Council must approve larger, multi-year, or legislatively required contracts, collective bargaining agreements, intergovernmental agreements, and the sale of major City assets. Safeguards prevent contracts from being used to get around bidding requirements or budget limits, and all contracts remain subject to audit and public disclosure.

Article IX: Annual and Special Independent Audits

Requires an independent certified public accountant (CPA) to audit all City finances every year, completed within nine months of the close of the fiscal year. Audit contracts must be competitively awarded, are limited to four-year terms with no more than two consecutive terms for the same firm, and Council may also order special audits to review specific City operations or investigate past financial practices.

Article X: Authorities, Boards, and Commissions

Allows the City to create authorities, boards, and commissions to carry out City business and encourage citizen involvement in government. Members are generally required to live in the City, are nominated by the

Mayor and confirmed by Council, and vacancies must be filled within 60 days. Council must act by ordinance to change the powers of, or abolish, any such body.

Article XI: Citizens' Petition and Referendum

Gives residents direct tools to participate in lawmaking. Voters may petition Council to consider a new ordinance or to reconsider one already adopted, and if Council does not act, the question can go to the ballot for voters to decide. Certain core matters such as the budget, tax levies, zoning, and the Administrative Code are not subject to referendum. The article sets signature requirements (generally 10% of the vote cast in the last mayoral election), limits the number of measures on any one ballot, and also allows residents to petition for a special Council meeting or to place an item on Council's agenda.

Article XII: Accountability, Conduct, and Ethics

Confirms that all City officials and employees are subject to Pennsylvania's Public Official and Employee Ethics Act and directs Council to adopt procedures covering conflicts of interest, gifts, and proper use of City resources, with penalties for violations. Council may also create an independent ethics commission to administer and enforce these rules.

Article XIII: Administrative Code

Requires the Mayor to propose, and Council to adopt, an Administrative Code within 18 months of the Charter taking effect. The Administrative Code will spell out the detailed organization of City government departments, budgeting and purchasing procedures, and personnel policies and the operational details beneath the Charter's framework.

Article XIV: Transition

Manages the changeover from the City's current form of government to the new Charter government. It sets the Charter to take effect January 1, 2027, if approved by voters in the November 2026 election; keeps current officeholders and employee rights, pensions, and benefits intact; phases in Council elections in 2027 and 2029; establishes a five-member Transition Committee to oversee the process; allows temporary ordinances during the transition; and delays the new tax revenue growth limit for two years while the new government gets established.

This summary is provided for general public information and does not replace or modify the legal text of the draft Charter. Residents are encouraged to review the full document and attend Study Commission meetings with questions.