ALDERMAN'S COURT AD HOC COMMITTEE MEETING

The Alderman's Court Ad Hoc Committee was held on October 1, 2026, at 3:30 p.m. with Mr. Anderson presiding. The members present were Mr. Lewis (via Webex), Ms. Smack, Mr. Witham, Ms. Gibbs, Dr. Halpern, and Dr. Hoff. Rep. Harris, Ex-Officio member, attended the meeting via Webex.

Staff members present were Ms. Marney and Ms. Martin.

ADOPTION OF AGENDA

Mr. Anderson stated that the scheduled guest was unable to attend and requested deletion of Item 3, Guest Presentation, from the agenda.

Dr. Hoff moved for adoption of the agenda, deleting Item 3, Guest Presentation, seconded by Dr. Halpern and unanimously carried.

ADOPTION OF MINUTES

Dr. Hoff moved for adoption of the minutes of the Alderman's Court Ad Hoc Committee Meeting of July 21, 2026, seconded by Ms. Smack and unanimously carried.

RECAP OF THE LAST MEETING AND QUESTIONS

Mr. Anderson reviewed the previous meeting, which included an extensive discussion with the Clerk of the Newark Alderman's Court regarding court operations and possible approaches for Dover. Responses from the Newark court to committee members' questions had been distributed. He stated that discussions with other jurisdictions would provide additional information regarding whether and how an Alderman's Court could operate in Dover.

Mr. Anderson explained that the committee's recommendation would be submitted to the Legislative, Finance, and Administration Committee, followed by City Council and State Legislature. He emphasized the importance of developing goals before determining the court's structure and obtaining broad community support for any proposed Charter change.

GOALS:

Committee members discussed the following proposed goals for an Alderman's Court.

1. Improve the quality of life for all, including residents and offenders.
2. Provide clear distinctions between matters handled by the Alderman's Court and matters handled by the State court system.
3. Establish the court's jurisdiction, including exclusive and joint jurisdiction.
4. Develop cost and revenue estimates and assess whether the court could be self-sustaining.
5. Ensure that the court is community-oriented and not driven solely by fines.
6. Include referrals to drug court and other specialty courts.
7. Retain a criminal focus and avoid affecting people's property through the court's jurisdiction.
8. Develop sentencing guidelines that include constructive community service.
9. Explore whether the court could serve as an entry point for individuals needing mental health assistance.
10. Explore probation before judgment as a mechanism for paid workforce training, soft skills development, and an assessment of individual needs.

Dr. Halpern stated the importance of focusing on improving the quality of life for both residents and offenders. He emphasized the need to determine whether a local court would provide an effective mechanism for achieving that goal.
Ms. Smack discussed establishing clear jurisdiction and providing guidance to law enforcement regarding matters that would be heard in the Alderman's Court and matters that would remain in the State court system.

Mr. Witham explained the distinction between exclusive and shared jurisdiction. Members also raised the importance of assessing legislative support for a proposed Charter change.

Mr. Witham stated that a proposed budget should identify operating costs and estimated annual revenue. Members discussed financial sustainability and the possible use of any surplus. Concern was expressed that financial needs should not influence findings of guilt or the assessment of fines and that the court should operate to help the community.

In response to questions regarding property and municipal code enforcement matters, Mr. Anderson stated that jurisdiction remained a question for the committee to determine. He noted that the City already had appeal boards for construction and other code matters and expressed support for retaining those processes. Mr. Witham explained that a court limited to criminal matters would not have jurisdiction over civil building code appeals.

Mr. Anderson proposed referrals to existing specialty courts, including drug court and veterans court, to provide early intervention and assistance. Members also discussed sentencing alternatives, including community service, to avoid placing additional financial burdens on individuals living in poverty.

Discussion included whether the court could provide an entry point for mental health evaluation and treatment.

Mr. Anderson stated that the proposed goals would be put in writing and distributed to members, including those who were absent, to allow additional input by email. The goals would be brought back for discussion in November, after the election.

COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT STRATEGY

Committee members discussed online and paper surveys to solicit opinions on proposed goals, identify additional goals, and determine support for an Alderman's Court. Concerns were raised regarding whether survey responses would represent the community and whether participants would have sufficient information about the proposed court to provide informed responses. Members suggested providing educational information before requesting feedback.

Ms. Smack recommended holding more than one town hall and providing adequate advance notice explaining the purpose of the meetings and the issues to be discussed.

Dr. Halpern recommended surveys before and after town halls to assess participants' views and understanding. Members also discussed managing meetings to encourage constructive comments regarding problems and possible solutions.

Ms. Gibbs emphasized the importance of obtaining input from communities most likely to be affected by the court and ensuring that outreach reached more than those who routinely participated. Mr. Anderson discussed the possibility of an evening meeting to receive public

comment once a proposal had been developed. He emphasized combining accountability with opportunities for rehabilitation and improving conditions throughout the City.

During concluding discussion, members raised the need for support at both the City and State levels. Mr. Anderson discussed the importance of community support for a Charter amendment and the possibility of seeking voter input if necessary.

Mr. Anderson proposed an additional goal of connecting eligible individuals with reentry services, paid job training, workforce development, and other assistance based on an assessment of their needs. He discussed probation before judgment as a possible mechanism for participation and cited a Wilmington program as an example of efforts to reduce crime and repeat offenses. Mr. Witham noted that rehabilitation programs could exceed the penalties associated with low-level offenses and that participant agreement would be necessary.

Dr. Halpern discussed barriers to employment, including a lack of identification and a mailing address, and the need to connect individuals with existing services. It was noted that social services could provide a mailing address for some individuals receiving assistance.

Mr. Witham recommended involving Finance, the Police Department, and the City Clerk's Office in developing projected costs, including administrative staffing, judges, citation preparation, and distribution. Members discussed potential volunteer assistance during startup, legislative funding, grants, and partnerships with service providers. A previously discussed startup estimate of approximately $500,000 was mentioned; it was not presented as a finalized budget.

Ms. Marney noted that costs would depend on staffing arrangements, including whether employees were part-time or full-time and whether benefits would be required. Possible startup assistance from the Department of Justice was suggested if the court reduced demands on the State system. Further financial analysis was needed.

Mr. Anderson stated that a Charter amendment would authorize the City to establish a court but would not immediately create or fund it. He estimated that securing a location, staff, and initial funding could require nine months to a year. Members discussed possible judicial nomination and approval procedures, the use of attorneys or lay judges, and the importance of legal experience for the chief judge. No appointment procedure was adopted.

Dr. Halpern requested information regarding traffic citations issued in Dover, the portion of fines and court costs distributed to the State, and actual revenue received by the City. Mr. Anderson stated that the information would be sought through the City Manager and Finance, with input from the Police Department. Mr. Witham noted the availability of State statistical information and the importance of distinguishing assessed fines from amounts collected.

Mr. Anderson discussed adopting municipal ordinances that mirrored certain State offenses to retain applicable revenue locally. Mr. Witham noted that municipal ordinances and changes to State statutes addressing jurisdiction would be needed. Mr. Anderson expressed a preference for addressing the proposed structure and jurisdiction as part of the authorization process.

The meeting adjourned at 4:41 p.m.

David Anderson
Chairman