

The Oregonian

Editorial: Joint Terrorism Task Force Critical to Portland's Safety

*By The Oregonian Editorial Board
February 10, 2019*

The Portland City Council will yet again debate whether Portland police officers should remain on the FBI's Joint Terrorism Task Force.

The city has cycled in and out of the group of local and federal law enforcement agencies numerous times since the task force was created in 2000, when partnerships focused on prevention were recommended by the 9/11 Commission. And while Portland has uneventfully been a full-time member since 2015, newly elected Commissioner Jo Ann Hardesty is again pushing the issue to the forefront. She doesn't trust Portland police or the FBI, says she heard similar sentiments from constituents and promised voters that pulling Portland out would be one of her first official acts.

The council plans to discuss the Portland task force's controversial history on Wednesday. Typically, a vote comes at least a week later, providing time for commissioners to have questions answered before making a final call. Yet Hardesty has pushed for a vote the next day.

But there's no reason to rush.

The council should have a full discussion and have all of their questions answered, both to benefit their own deliberations and to give residents hard data about the task force's actions. More important, commissioners can use that time to craft clear requirements that will address Portlanders' concerns while still allowing officers to remain in a task force critical to our safety.

Indeed, Hardesty's criticisms reasonable. Many Portlanders recall a few headline-grabbing cases over the past 15 years that raised valid questions about government overreach and the targeting of racial and religious groups. Fears have been amplified as residents feel a more strained relationship with Portland Police and are even more frightened by the race-baiting and other divisive rhetoric they hear from the Trump Administration. And living in a so-called "sanctuary city," Portlanders are wary that Immigration and Customs Enforcement investigators are members of the task force. It's against city ordinance – and state law – for local law enforcement to assist federal agents if a person has only violated immigration laws.

But it's important to put those concerns in perspective. Among 100 similar partnerships in other large cities, Portland's task force includes two full-time Portland police officers who work with other local and federal officers, investigators and specialists, such as bomb technicians and international terrorism analysts. A Portland police sergeant is regularly updated on the local officers' confidential work.

Renn Cannon, the FBI's special agent in charge in Portland, makes a convincing case that while a person's immigration status may arise in some cases, it's not the task force's priority or a violation that alone would launch an investigation.

The task force focuses on threats of violence, whether a tip on a potential school shooter or the 2016 standoff at the Malheur National Wildlife Refuge. The task force's work faces various and broad checks and balances – from federal judges who approve wire taps to local juries who consider their cases.

And Portland does face safety risks. Commissioner Nick Fish, who supports the task force, has been regularly briefed by the FBI and told The Oregonian/OregonLive Editorial Board he has been surprised by the number of potential threats concerning the city's large port system.

Walking away means we'd lose the insight we have and eliminate the very oversight critics say is lacking. That said, Portland leaders should use this moment to make improvements in the agreement.

Mayor Ted Wheeler, who is also the police commissioner, receives briefings along with any commissioners who request them on an as-needed basis. Portland Police Chief Danielle Outlaw should seek the top clearance, a move that would signal her commitment to the partnership and deepen her understanding of exactly how our officers are used.

Portlanders also deserve more and better information – even if generalized at times to address privacy concerns. Reports submitted so far by the FBI have been so incomplete as to be useless. The city should have a clear understanding how valuable local resources are being used.

Cannon and U.S. Attorney for Oregon Billy Williams also told the editorial board that local officers help the task force connect with social services that they wouldn't otherwise be able to easily access. There's one case often referred to in which the subject was well known to the Portland officers, who offered that insight and headed off a costly investigation in favor of connecting the person with local support.

Such details illustrate why local officers are necessary. Sharing general data about cases referred to local mental health agencies helps build trust and backs up the growing understanding that police need more assistance from mental health specialists and places to take those in need – other than jails.

It's also important to remember that the Joint Terrorism Task Force is just one of many such partnerships local police have with the FBI, including the Metro Gang Task Force. Local police also rely on the Portland-based Northwest Regional Computer Forensics Laboratory, and are members of several other task forces focusing on child exploitation, sex trafficking and internet crimes – partnerships that have helped many crime victims and led to dozens of convictions in recent years.

And what about the millions in federal dollars used to fund various police functions and new programs? Would we consider pulling the plug on these various ventures, too -- simply because of FBI involvement?

No. But city leaders should listen carefully to this debate and recognize that Portlanders' distrust of law enforcement in general underlies their concerns. There's work to be done on all levels to improve relations with communities of color and show residents that our police agencies deserve our trust.

But stepping away from these conversations, partnerships and insight isn't the way to address these valid concerns and fears.

Portland should stay in the task force, providing our officers' on-the-ground experiences to the daily discussion and allowing local leaders a seat at the table so they can make clear what our communities need to be safe. And, just as important, to feel safe.

Portland's Form of Government Fails Residents In Almost Every Way Thinkable, Report Finds

By Gordon Friedman

February 10, 2019

Portland's odd form of government fails residents in nearly every way imaginable and should be rebuilt from top to bottom, Portland City Club researchers concluded in a report published Sunday.

The report, written after months of research and interviews with current and former city officials, promises to reignite the debate over whether Portland should abandon its commission-form of government in favor of something better.

Portland's city charter invests nearly all powers in the four commissioners and the mayor, who assigns commissioners to oversee city bureaus. The quintet has legislative, executive, administrative and quasi-judicial powers all at once, a remarkable melding of say-so that exists in no other major American city, the report says.

City Club researchers set out to answer two questions with their report: Is Portland's form of government effective and does it allow for fair representation of Portlanders?

Their unequivocal answer: no.

Portland's commission-form of government permits city departments to be controlled by commissioners "with little, if any, regard to their managerial or subject-matter expertise," the report states, and "appears to result in poor bureaucratic performance."

The rules for electing commissioners are also "inherently inequitable," researchers found, saying the government fails to fairly represent Portlanders "by nearly every metric."

The report notes that Portland's City Council has rarely reflected the city's diverse population. In the council's more than 100-year existence, nearly every member has been a well-off white male land owner.

The current council, however, has three women, including the city's first African American female commissioner. In addition, three of the incumbents are renters.

The government Portlanders need, researchers concluded, is one where the mayor and city council have fewer powers, and where bureaus are overseen by a professional city manager who answers back to the mayor and council.

A city manager system would ensure "the people who are elected are there to set policy and listen to constituents," Ken Fairfax, a retired U.S. ambassador who headed the City Club research effort, said in an interview.

Portland's system of electing five commissioners city-wide should be scrapped, the club recommends, for one where at least eight city councilors are elected from geographical districts.

In a statement, Mayor Ted Wheeler stopped short of embracing full-scale change, but said Portland needs "a modern form of government" where officials can "respond to the challenges of the era but be able to lead more effectively and be held more accountable to the public we serve."

"It almost feels like we're overcoming the form of government" rather than being advanced by it, Wheeler said. Whether to redo the city's form of government is ultimately a decision for voters, he said.

Mary Hull Caballero, the elected city auditor, said Portland is past due for reform.

“The commission-form of government cannot keep pace with a fast-growing, increasingly diverse Portland,” said Hull Caballero, whom City Club researchers interviewed for the report.

“It’s hard to defend a system in which the city is run by committee and elected officials represent city bureaus instead of community members,” she said. “Portlanders deserve a more responsive and accountable form of government.”

Not so fast, said Commissioner Nick Fish. Portland’s government is imperfect, Fish said in an interview, but it encourages innovative approaches to problem solving.

Fish balked at the idea of installing a city manager – “an unelected bureaucrat,” he said – and pointed to the recent election of Commissioner Jo Ann Hardesty, who is African American, as proof the practice of city-wide voting is fair.

“For the average person, this is not a big issue,” Fish said.

Inside Portland City Hall, however, the commission-style government has long been made a scapegoat for the ills of the city’s vast bureaucracy by mayors and commissioners, some of whom have harbored a deep contempt for the system that they barely strive to hide.

Among the common problems: Bureaus are shuffled between the commissioners frequently enough that long-term planning is difficult to achieve. And bureau directors, many of whom have professional expertise in their department’s purview, sometimes struggle to work well with their political bosses.

“Members of the city council do not walk into these jobs as experienced administrators of public works or parks or police,” said Fairfax, the City Club researcher. “They come in as politicians.”

Wheeler has been diplomatic about the city’s form of government while leaving room for tepid disapproval. “I don’t think it’s the best model,” Wheeler told The Oregonian/OregonLive last year.

Despite its evident problems, Portlanders have rejected ballot measures to do away with the commission-style government eight times since it was established in 1913.

But a new poll, conducted in December by Portland opinion research firm DHM, found attitudes have changed. More than 70 percent of Portland voters surveyed said they strongly support electing commissioners by district rather than citywide. That represented a significant jump from 2016, when 54 percent of voters surveyed expressed that view.

In this year’s poll, voters were first asked whether they believe the current City Council represents everyone equally or whether some neighborhoods are represented better than others. Two-thirds said the latter. Those perceptions could have caused so many survey respondents to express support for elections by district.

The persistence of Portland’s citywide elections system leaves it among the last cities to have councilors elected that way rather than by ward or district, according to the City Club

And almost every other major city has a council with more than five members, allowing for better representation, according to the club. Portland, for example, has one councilor for every 128,000 residents, compared to one councilor for 67,000 Seattleites.

The City Club panel recommend Portland have eight to 12 councilors.

“This number of city councilors would put Portland more in line with other American cities of similar size,” the report states, “and would significantly increase the ability of the city council to

represent Portland's increasingly diverse population without suffering excessive costs and difficult operation associated with very large city councils."

City Club researchers also recommend electing councilors by district rather than with the current scheme, in which officials are elected city-wide.

Even better, the report states, is a system where districts have multiple councilors. For example, five districts could field 10 councilors of two per district.

Researchers also said councilors should be chosen in a so-called instant-runoff election that eliminates the need for a primary election. In two-member districts, for example, the top pair of vote-getters would win during a single round of balloting.

"Changing the voting model to a single-round system would lead to wider participation in the electoral process," the report states, and would cut back on the power of the incumbency.

Another reason Portland should scrap its at-large voting system, according to the City Club report: It's likely illegal.

Many cities used to have a commission-style government, the report states, but they were dismantled by courts under the Voting Rights Act, which cracked down on discriminatory voting practices in mostly southern states. Judges found that racial bias played a role in those cities deciding against ward-based voting, the intent being to keep African Americans from electing favored candidates.

Court rulings finding that at-large voting hampers minority groups are so common, the City Club found, "that it can be hard to understand why at-large voting is still in use in Portland or anywhere else."

In his statement, Wheeler said the at-large voting system "means that not every area of Portland is represented."

"In our form of government, there's a legitimate question about diverse representation," Wheeler said.

Only three people of color have been elected to the Portland City Council. Commissioner Hardesty, elected in November, was the first in a generation. People of color make up 26 percent of Portland's voting-age population.

"The more we looked at at-large voting the more we realized it is a really horrible system," Fairfax said.

The only reason Portland still has the system is because the Supreme Court never banned the practice outright, he said.

"If somebody did bring a suit, Portland would probably lose," Fairfax said. "It's that bad."

Canzano: Trail Blazers Likely to be Sold, Creating Some Angst at City Hall

*By John Canzano
February 8, 2019*

The NBA's trade deadline ticked down on Thursday.

But the hand-wringing is just beginning at City Hall.

Portland City Commissioner Nick Fish said on Thursday that he expects the city's NBA team to be sold in the wake of owner Paul Allen's death last year. Fish is concerned that new Trail Blazers ownership might seek to relocate the team.

"The clear sense I've received from Blazers management is that this team will be put on the block at some point," Fish said. "I've been told the estate will take about five to six years to be settled.

"We expect the team will be put on the market."

The Trail Blazers' lease with the city of Portland runs through 2025. It includes iron-clad language that would ensure the team stays through at least 2023. But it's the uncertainty that Fish and some others would like to put to rest in front of a potential sale. And I don't blame him.

Be clear, the NBA is working in Portland.

The Blazers will likely make the playoffs and have a functional home arena. Through 30 home dates, they've drawn more than 582,000 fans. The franchise is eighth in the league in home attendance (19,400). Also, Forbes released its valuations of the league's franchises this week, putting the Blazers and their home arena at \$1.6 billion.

Allen bought the team in 1988 for \$70 million.

Commissioner Adam Silver would have a difficult time pitching a potential move of the Portland NBA franchise to the public and other league owners as an urgent matter. But Fish and some other city leaders know how quickly things can change. They also know Seattle would love to have an NBA team.

"It's a huge wildcard and it reminds us we can't take anything for granted in the Rose Quarter," Fish said. "We have to do everything we can to make clear to a future owner that we want the Trail Blazers to stay here. It casts a shadow over development plans in the Rose Quarter and puts a cloud over a future owner of the team."

The Sonics left Seattle in front of the 2008-09 season after efforts failed to secure \$220 million in public funding for KeyArena improvements. Howard Schultz sold the Sonics to an investment group led by an Oklahoma City businessman named Clay Bennett, who then whisked the NBA team off to his home city.

The Blazers have no such arena issues. But the timing of the potential sale and the expiration of the NBA franchise's lease make for a tricky transition to new NBA ownership. Anyone potentially buying the team would want that lease matter settled, and also, desire the area around the venue to be more vibrant.

"The current lease with the Blazers is very favorable to the city," Fish said. "I would expect the renegotiation of that lease to be more challenging."

Fish said he'd like to see Portland with a Major League Baseball team. He likes the effort put together by the Portland Diamond Project. He also thinks Portland could support an NHL franchise in addition to the wildly successful Timbers and Thorns franchises.

Fish said: "Wouldn't it be great to see baseball, soccer, basketball and an NHL team in our city? It's conceivable that a new owner would want to relocate a team... it may be a stretch, but we can't take that for granted."

City leaders have worked hard over the years to come up with a way to activate the Rose Quarter and re-connect it with the historic Albina District. Plans and visions have come and gone. Fish

said, "they've all fallen short." But he sounded hopeful that the latest development effort could help bring jobs and residents back to the area, and also, help keep the NBA team in Portland.

"Between Legacy hospital and Veterans Memorial Coliseum we relocated a lot of people and disrupted the area," Fish said. "It's about healing wounds. But that vision is going to be very hard to advance without the full participation of the ownership of the Trail Blazers."

What's clear is that the Blazers are being transparent with the city. Also, it's clear based on the valuations that NBA franchises have become terrific investments.

The Milwaukee Bucks franchise valuation, according to Forbes, is \$1.35 billion. An ownership group led by Oregon State graduate Wes Edens bought the team for \$550 million just four years ago and dumped the Bucks' aging arena in exchange for Fiserv Forum.

NBA franchises in Atlanta, Utah and Minnesota have all completed major renovations attempting to attract sponsorship opportunities and state-of-the-art seating packages. Portland completed a \$16 million renovation to its home arena four seasons ago.

I'm on record that I think the Blazers would benefit from new ownership. Fresh ideas. Renewed passion. Perhaps a local ownership group led by Timbers/Thorns owner Merrit Paulson and his father, Henry, would be exactly what the franchise needs to truly lift off.

Still, the uncertainty scares some city leaders.

Said Fish: "We can't take anything for granted."

The Portland Tribune

City Club Report: Portland Government Must Change

By Jim Redden

February 10, 2019

Longstanding civic organization calls for electing commissioners by geographic district, among other things.

The City Club of Portland released a report recommending sweeping changes in Portland's form of government on Sunday. Although not yet adopted by the longstanding civic organization, it calls for a complete overhaul of Portland's unique form of government, where the mayor and commissioners each propose legislation and oversee individual bureaus.

Among other things, the report recommends: increasing the number of commissioners from four to eight and electing them districts; centralizing administrative authority under the mayor, who would only vote to break ties; and hiring a professional city manager to over all bureaus.

The report is expected to kick off a public discussion over Portland's system and whether a ballot measure should be proposed to change it. Although the City Club has previously recommended changes in Portland's form of governance, this is the first one to propose expanding the number of council seats and electing the commissioners by district.

More Portland voters support having council members elected by geographic districts that ever before, according to a poll released by the Portland Business Alliance on Thursday.

The DHM Research poll found that 70% of likely voters support changing council elections from citywide to districts. That is a 16 point increase since a DHM poll taken in 2016, when 54% of voters supported such a change.

A forum on the report will be held from 6:30 to 8:30 p.m. on Tuesday, Feb. 12, at the Alberta Rose Theatre, 3000 N.E. Alberta St. For more information, go to pdxcityclub.org.

[You can read the report here.](#)

Willamette Week

Report Suggests Fixing Dysfunctional Portland Government With a City Manager and Twice as Many Commissioners

By Aaron Mesh

February 10, 2019

The City Club report pans Portland's current system—but doesn't repeat past calls for a strong mayor.

To get better government, Portland needs more government.

That's the conclusion of a new report from the City Club of Portland, which recommends scrapping the city's commission form of government and handing much of the responsibility for Portland's daily operations to an appointed city manager.

In Portland's current government, voters elect five commissioners to city-wide seats, each with an equal vote on the Council. The mayor assigns city bureaus to his or her four colleagues.

The scathing report, released Sunday, condemns that form of government as unjust and unworkable.

That's not a new or surprising finding: For decades, Portland mayors have blamed their failings on the commission form of government and the bickering it inspires, while newspapers have repeatedly observed that city-wide elections have resulted in just three African-Americans and nine women serving on City Council.

What is more interesting in the report is the recommended solution, from 16 expert witnesses ranging from former Mayor Bud Clark to current City Auditor Mary Hull Caballaro.

"Portland should have a professional city manager selected by the mayor, subject to council approval," the report concludes. "The city's day-to-day bureaucratic administrative functions would be handled by a professional, non-political city manager whose function is to effectively implement the policies and budgets approved by the city council. This method of selecting a city manager would vest the mayor with appropriate authority to manage the city without concentrating executive power too heavily in a single office."

The report implies that Portland's elected officials struggle to walk and chew gum at the same time. Their two tasks, of managing city functions and making decisions about political issues brought before council, are spreading officials too thin and paralyzing them, the report concludes.

So the report suggests another fix: more officials.

The report proposes electing commissioners by geographical districts—a reform long suggested by observers. But it goes further, recommending that the City Council expand to at least eight commissioners, plus the mayor.

That's a minimum number: The report says the City Council could use as many as 12 commissioners.

"A larger council offers more chance to represent diverse viewpoints and backgrounds," the report says. "The bureau assignments would be spread more thinly, and each commissioner might have fewer staff, but they might also have more time to focus on constituent services and their policy and legislative functions."

City Hall faces an obvious challenge in implementing these suggested reforms: the voters, who have rejected district-based elections five times, most recently in 2007. But the report breaks from past reform efforts, which tried to replace the commission government with a "strong mayor" system where the mayor gets more power over his or her colleagues.

"Your committee encountered so little support for a strong mayor system that we do not believe a full analysis of its potential merits would be justified," the report says. "Portland-based political consultant Mark Wiener's testimony was particularly enlightening. Even though he believes that Portland's commission government needs to be replaced, he nonetheless opposed the last attempt at reform because he believes a move to a strong mayor system would be a major error. As he explained, he saw no reason to replace one bad system with another bad one and instead hopes to support a move to a better form of government in the future."

Yet it's hardly clear that voters would be any more excited about an un-elected bureaucratic manager than they have been about a more powerful mayor.

Oregon Lawmakers Consider Bill That Would Pave Way for Exporting Cannabis to Other States

*By Nigel Jaquiss
February 10, 2019*

Senate Bill 582 gets a public hearing and the city of Portland is among those backing the move to ease Oregon's oversupply of weed.

On Feb. 7, the Senate Judiciary Committee made the first step toward what cannabis advocates hope will eventually be interstate trade in cannabis, when the committee held a public hearing on Senate Bill 582.

The bill would establish a framework for "cross-jurisdictional coordination and enforcement of marijuana-related businesses," between adjoining states in which cannabis is legal (right now, that would be California, Nevada and Washington). The bill specifically prohibits transporting marijuana by air, because airspace is federally regulated, or through "any mode of transportation subject solely to federal regulation."

That latter condition would appear to leave open the eventual movement of cannabis on highways and roads subject to state and local regulation, although it is unlikely cannabis producers or wholesalers will be in a hurry to challenge federal laws that forbid such movements.

Among those testifying in favor of the move toward cross-border cannabis: the city of Portland. Suk Rhee, the director of the city's Office of Community and Civic Life, and Brandon Goldner, the city's cannabis program supervisor, said Oregon can help other states get implement recreational cannabis and extend the state's brand ahead of eventual national legalization.

"Recreational cannabis marketplaces in each state have been limited to trade within their own borders," they said in written testimony. "We believe the time has come for that to change."

By now, the towering over-supply of recreational cannabis in Oregon is a matter of widespread knowledge.

Policymakers decided early on that they'd target the state's illegal market by granting an unlimited number of licenses to grow and sell recreational weed. That policy succeeded: a recent report from the Oregon Liquor Control Commission found that there's currently six-and-a-half years worth of consumption in inventory in the recreational system. Prices have dropped more than 50 percent since the fall of 2016, and Beau Whitney, an economist who tracks the industry expects prices to continue a significant decline.

Senate Bill 582, would begin to establish a framework for exporting cannabis to other states.

The sponsors of the bill, state Sen. Floyd Prozanski (D-Eugene) and state Rep. Ken Helm (D-Beaverton), are both lawyers and well aware that cannabis remains illegal under federal law and that shipping the drug from one state to another is a felony. So the bill is a preliminary step and an effort to be ready when the national climate tilts toward full legalization.

Billy Williams, who as the U.S. Attorney for Oregon is the state's top federal law enforcement official, told the Associated Press on Feb. 7 in response to the bill that no matter what lawmakers have in mind, shipping marijuana outside Oregon is still federal crime.

"This bill is an attempt to remedy the rampant overproduction and trafficking of marijuana outside of Oregon," Williams said.

The Daily Journal of Commerce

It Takes a Village ... To Move One

*By Sam Tenney
February 8, 2019*

A cluster of tiny homes in North Portland that serves as a shelter for homeless women has been moved to a new location thanks to the efforts of a small army of volunteers and the support of the local building industry.

Kenton Women's Village opened in summer 2017 as a one-year pilot project on a city-owned lot in the Kenton neighborhood. The idea was to create a transitional housing community for women experiencing homelessness without the constraints of a traditional overnight shelter environment, where women's safety can be at risk and a sense of permanence is lacking.

"This is more individual; it's their home," said Deborah Kamprath, development project manager with Catholic Charities, which operates the shelter. "They have privacy and a place to put their stuff, where with shelters you don't have that. You're just going in for the night and leaving in the morning."

The original village had capacity for 14 residents, all whom were housed in small sleeping “pods” designed and built by the Partners On Dwelling Initiative, which included Portland State University’s Center for Public Interest Design and several local architecture firms. The goal was to create a replicable model for tackling the homelessness issue by building small, inexpensive housing units that would be easy to mass-produce and transport.

The village proved to be a success, and when the yearlong trial period expired the Kenton Neighborhood Association voted overwhelmingly to allow it to stay in operation. Imminent construction of a low-income housing development on the village site meant a new location had to be found, and a suitable one on another city-owned parcel just a few hundred feet away was chosen.

LMC Construction has spearheaded the effort to prepare the new site, an approximately three-quarters-acre parcel at 2420 N. Columbia Blvd., for the move. The firm has been working pro bono since this past fall to build concrete pads for the housing pods, grade and landscape the site, and install electrical, plumbing and sanitary service.

The project has come to fruition thanks to the help of multiple contractors, suppliers, design and engineering firms who have donated labor and materials to make the move happen. Scott Kotlarz, a superintendent with LMC Construction, said he has received overwhelming support from firms that are eager to support the effort.

“I don’t have submittals (and) I don’t have contracts with anybody, but everybody has stepped up,” he said. “They’re here no matter when I call. It’s been great.”

The Northwest College of Construction (NWCOC) has been instrumental in supplying labor, Kotlarz said. Students have helped with multiple scopes of work, including concrete, framing, site work and landscaping. Late last month, students in a Portland Opportunities Industrialization Center pre-apprenticeship program, led by a NWCOC instructor, helped put the finishing touches on the new site by framing a trash enclosure, laying hog’s fuel paths and building decks.

Residents are expected to return this week to the village, which will reopen with six of the original pods, one donated tiny house and two donated temporary tiny homes on wheels. A second phase of work will bring the site up to its capacity of 20 pods; volunteers last week kicked off an effort to build additional units.

A total of 21 commercial and residential builders have committed to participation in the Pod Build Challenge, during which they will each construct a unit over the course of the next couple of months before installation on site in April. The units will be installed with the help of Andersen Construction. The remaining eight units will be installed at a second village location later this year.

For Kotlarz, whose work on the project will be wrapping up with the completion of this phase, it has been one of the most fulfilling experiences of his nearly 40-year career.

“It’s been neat to see this process develop as it goes,” he said. “It’s not so much a job; it’s more an honor to be present and be a part of this.”

OPB

Is Portland Ready To Let Go Of Its Commission System Of Government?

*By Amelia Templeton
February 10, 2019*

Portland's City Club wants to talk about the structural problem with our government. No, not PERS, or the lack of a statewide sales tax.

The commission system.

In a report released Sunday, a research team convened by the civic group recommends a complete overhaul of Portland's unusual form of government.

Portland is the last large American city still using a commission system, in which members of the City Council are elected citywide and serve a dual role as legislators and administrators of individual bureaus.

The City Club's research committee found that the system "is inherently inequitable and has long since ceased to be the most effective form of government for Portland."

The report could be the first salvo in a new campaign to convince voters to abandon the commission system. In the next two years, the City Council has to convene a group of 20 citizens to review the city's charter and recommend changes to put to voters for approval.

Mayor Ted Wheeler says he supports changing the form of government — if voters approve it.

"Even Galveston, Texas, where this form of government was invented, evolved to a more modern form of government in 1960," he said.

Portland's commission system and at-large elections have long been viewed as problematic by Portland's mayors and by groups concerned with equity.

"There are areas that don't get the same access to decision-making," said former Portland Mayor Tom Potter, who led the last major effort to ditch the commission system.

"Talk to most people of color, and they'll say they don't feel represented. You can talk to people living east of 82nd and they'll say there's nobody out here who really represents us."

But voters have remained stubbornly supportive of it. Proponents view it as a point of civic pride, a way to prevent the mayor from holding too much power, and a system that has helped the city lead on environmental issues and other policies that are citywide priorities without a geographic focus.

Efforts to change it have either failed to qualify for the ballot or have been defeated at least five times: in 1950, 1958, 1966, 2002, 2007. Most recently, in 2016 East Portland voters failed to gather enough signatures to put an initiative for district representation on the ballot.

The City Club's report recommends hiring a professional city manager to run bureaus and oversee day-to-day services, increasing the size of the City Council, and electing that council using districts, instead of having candidates run citywide.

Those recommendations are a change of tune from the civic organization, which helped defeat the last effort to ditch the commission system in 2007.

“I’m glad that they have come around,” Potter said. “I think partly it’s due to change in leadership and the makeup of the City Club itself. People are coming with a different set of experiences and views about government.”

The commission system was first developed in Galveston, Texas, after a hurricane and was popular with progressive reformers around the turn of the century who believed it helped limit corruption. Portland adopted it in 1913. Most cities abandoned it as professional civil service corps replaced patronage forms of government.

According to the City Club’s report, critics say the system leads Commissioners to focus on their bureaus at the expense of citywide priorities – for example, defending their bureaus against budget cuts. It can also be confusing for residents trying to resolve a problem or advocate for themselves to figure out who to contact.

But the research team’s central argument against the commission system is that it necessitates citywide elections. Otherwise, a commissioner elected in a particular neighborhood who is empowered to oversee, for example, the Parks Bureau, has an obvious incentive to provide better parks in their district than in other parts of the city.

A significant body of political science research and numerous court cases have shown that at-large elections can make it harder for women and people of color to win. As the report puts it:

“The inherent bias in the current two-stage, at-large election system not only disadvantages people of color, but also anyone who is not from a privileged, white, male background. Only nine women have served, and—up to now—none of them have been women of color. Portland residents who rent their homes, who have lower incomes, and who live in the eastern and northern portions of the city are similarly drastically underrepresented. Though the witnesses interviewed by the committee presented a broad range of viewpoints and opinions, there was zero disagreement about this essential facet of the status quo.”

The report suggests that simply switching from at-large to district-based elections will not, on its own, guarantee better, more equitable representation in Portland, particularly given the city’s comparatively small population of people of color.

It recommends creating a relatively small number of districts, with multiple council members elected per district, “allowing underrepresented groups more power to boost individual candidates.”

Portlanders can look to Seattle for a taste of how district representation could change local political dynamics.

Seattle now elects seven of its nine city council members by district, a voter-approved change that went into effect in 2015.

That’s prompting candidates for the city’s upcoming election to shift their focus to hyperlocal issues in an effort to appear responsive to their districts, according to reporting from Crosscut.