



League of Women Voters of Portland

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Board of Directors October 29, 2021

Debbie Kaye
President

To: Portland Charter Commission, Form of Government Subcommittee

Marion McNamara
1st VP

From: League of Women Voters of Portland

Chris Cobey
2nd VP

Debbie Kaye, President

Nancy Donovan
3rd VP

Audrey Zunkel-deCoursey, Board member

Re: Suggestions for charter revisions concerning form of government

Adrienne Aiona
Treasurer

Members of the Form of Government Subcommittee:

Anne Davidson
Secretary

Thank you for volunteering to do the important work of examining our charter and proposing amendments to improve our form of government and elections.

Debbie Aiona
Carolyn Buppert

Judy Froemke

The League of Women Voters is a 101-year old grassroots nonpartisan political organization that encourages informed and active participation in government. As such, the Portland League has been closely following the work of the Charter Review Commission and appreciates the opportunity to engage Portlanders in this important civic process. In addition to this letter, we would be happy to designate a team of volunteers to meet with your group to discuss our recommendations.

Linda Mantel

Amber Nobe

Margaret Noel

Audrey Zunkel-
deCoursey

Off Board Leaders

Jen Jacobs
Budget

In late 2019, the League of Women Voters of Portland released an in-depth study report about Portland's government, which we invite you to [read in full online here](#) (paper copies available by request). Based on our research and consensus process, we developed a 2020 position statement that summarizes the reforms we advocate for:

Ann Dudley
Nominating

Mary McWilliams
Membership

Philip Thor
Endowment Fund

The League of Women Voters of Portland believes that a thriving, livable city requires a city government that meets these criteria: accountability, responsiveness, equity, efficiency, effectiveness, transparency, and nonpartisanship.

Our members believe that to more fully meet these criteria, Portland needs to improve its government structure. The highest priorities for change are to improve citizen representation by increasing the number of commissioners, to institute a city manager, and to establish the City Council as a legislative or policy-setting body.

Here, we are addressing the latter two of these suggestions, about instituting a city manager and establishing the City Council as a legislative body. We sent a separate letter to the Elections subcommittee earlier this month, addressing election reforms and the issue of expanding the size of City Council.

The League of Women Voters of Portland:

To promote political responsibility through informed and active participation in government.

We urge the Charter Commissioners to consider two key reforms to the city's form of government:

1. Establish the city council as a legislative body, not an administrative/executive one.

Here's why this is important: Redefining the City Council as a legislative, policy-making entity, without an administrative role, should enable council members to focus more on long-term and city-wide issues. They should also have time for more thorough analysis of the impacts and alternatives associated with such issues.

2. Institute a city manager.

Here's why this is important: Centralizing administrative responsibility in the hands of a professional manager can improve effectiveness and efficiency. The Mayor and Council can concentrate on their legislative powers of policy-making. The council-manager system increases equity and responsiveness and removes the administration of city business from politics.

These reforms are important to our organization. The League of Women Voters of Portland [endorses](#) accountability, responsiveness, equity, efficiency, effectiveness, transparency, and nonpartisanship.

How these changes will benefit marginalized Portlanders:

- A legislative Council could be expanded to a larger size, to enhance voter representation. The current structure, with the Council playing dual executive and legislative roles, would be incompatible with a larger Council.
- A city manager could reduce the competing interests of commissioners that impede collaboration/coordination between bureaus.

How these changes align with the Commission's North Stars:

- This would allow City Commissioners to be more **accessible** to voters and in touch with the communities they represent, because they would not be busy managing bureaus.
- This would increase **trust** in city government. Administrative and legislative functions could be separated, leaving politics out of city management. There would be a separation of the appropriating and spending functions of government; the council appropriates and the manager spends.
- A professionally managed city government would be **accountable**. The danger of abuse of authority is limited, since managers are appointed and can be removed by the Council at any time. Managers could be hired for their qualifications and competence; in contrast, when elected officials are assigned bureaus after they're in office, their lack of administrative experience and technical expertise may prevent them from asking the right questions of their bureau chiefs.
- A city manager could help the city be more **responsive** to long-term concerns. An employee could focus on building systems instead of winning elections. Portlanders would know who to go to about city governance concerns. City bureaus could build more collaboration without being siloed by their commissioners.

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Examples of this model in other places:

- Albuquerque, New Mexico, has had a mayor and city manager since 1991.
- Oakland, California, has a mayor and city administrator.
- Closer to home, both Multnomah County and Metro have a non-elected Chief Operating Officer as well as an elected board/commission. School boards usually hire superintendents, separating the roles of professional management and board oversight. Portlanders are already familiar with this model from these jurisdictions.
- Our neighbor, the city of Fairview, is voting this fall on a proposal to change from having a city administrator to a city manager. The proposal includes specifying the role of the city manager in the City Charter, instead of city code, using language copied from the Model Charter for Oregon Cities. A "yes" vote would mean that only the residents of Fairview could decide whether and how to change how the city manager is hired and removed and what their duties are. The current arrangement means the city administrator's job can be changed by changing the city code - which can be changed by the city council. Fairview Council members may offer helpful perspectives on why a city manager is useful.

Potential disadvantages of the two major reforms we recommend include the disruption from turnover in city managers and challenges in finding qualified candidates. These concerns are not addressed in the current system, either, in which elected City Commissioners serve as managers, regardless of their qualifications, and have bureau assignments that may be changed year to year.

On pages 25-28 of [our report on Portland's city government](#), we detail other advantages and disadvantages of several alternatives to the current commission form of government. Both the Strong Mayor-Council form and the Council-Manager form of government could work for Portland.

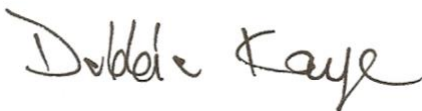
We believe that the Portland mayor should have the same voting power as other council members, establish the council agenda in collaboration with the other councilors, run the council meetings, prepare a city budget for council consideration, and serve as the formal representative of the city.

[Our report](#) concluded with these words:

When the next Charter Review Commission considers how the City Charter might be amended, their recommendations and the voters' decisions will be based on the criteria they prioritize for judging the potential improvements or trade-offs for each proposal. The League of Women Voters of Portland City Government Study Committee hopes this report will help guide the public, as we choose among the options that will shape Portland's future government.

Thank you for your consideration and for your commitment to public service.

Sincerely,



Debbie Kaye,
LWVPDX President



Audrey Zunkel-deCoursey,
LWVPDX Board Member