

Update Minneapolis 2009

January 29, 2009

The City of Minneapolis is truly unique. One would be hard pressed to find the type of citizen activism and engagement in another city. And to that extent, many of the city's unique government programs, like the Neighborhood Revitalization Program, represent a part of government that is driven by the actions of its citizens. In light of this proud tradition, the city will be facing significant challenges in the future. With deeper cuts to local government aid certain, difficult decisions face policy makers. As Mayor R.T. Rybak said recently, "Everything is going to have to be on the table."

With these challenges in mind, now is the time to take bold action to make our government work better. This is not a short term fix to address a huge financial challenge but rather a long term proposal to increase accountability, effectiveness and transparency. In the midst of the current funding crisis, we must seize the opportunity to make Minneapolis even brighter than it is today.

A Brief History

Minneapolis was incorporated as a town in 1856 through the territorial legislature of Minnesota. In 1867, the state legislature issued a charter upgrading the town to a city. This was the first of many governmental changes made at the state level. In 1872, Minneapolis merged with St. Anthony under the name of Minneapolis. The new charter, written by the state legislature, provided for a mayor, comptroller, treasurer and a city council. There were ten wards with two aldermen representing each ward. The first mayor of the merged cities was Eugene M. Wilson. In 1896, the state legislature granted Minneapolis home rule, with a government structure to be created through the approval of a city charter.

What followed were many attempts – and subsequent failures – at passing a charter. The City tried and failed to pass a charter in 1898, 1900, 1904, 1906, 1907 and 1913. In 1920, the voters finally approved a charter after an appointed commission took the original charter from 1872 and combined it with applicable state laws. During this time a Civil Service Commission, City Planning Commission, Board of Public Welfare and a Board of Estimate and Taxation were all approved by the state legislature. These were subsequently included in the approved charter of 1920.

In successive years, many commissions looked at streamlining the charter. Significant proposals to the Charter were proposed in 1926, 1948, 1960 and 1963, all of which were defeated. In total, there have been 167 amendments to the original charter. The last major change was passed in 1984, which created the executive committee and is where the current charter stands today.

Current Structure

The two most common forms of government are a "strong-mayor" and a "council-manager" form of government. In a strong-mayor form of government, all department heads report to the mayor. In certain cases, the mayor is assisted in that executive capacity by a deputy mayor. In a council-manager form of government, the mayor is elected citywide but serves on the city council as the chair of the council. The city manager in a council-manager form of government has the direct supervisory authority over all department heads. Common to each structure is the

tenet of good government - that there is one place where final management decisions are made and where all department heads are held accountable.

Minneapolis is uncommon in that its form of government is neither strong mayor or Council/Manager. All department heads report to both the Council and the Mayor. President Truman famously remarked “the buck stops here.” In Minneapolis today, the buck stops no where – and every where – leading to organizational chaos.

Currently, Minneapolis operates under a “weak-mayor” system. The weak mayor is a system in which the executive authority is shared between the city council and mayor. The mayor’s official duties include appointments and nominations to various agencies and commissions, through the executive committee (the body that approves major appointments including the city coordinator and city department heads). He can review and approve or veto actions of the city council and park board, subject to a veto override. He proposes annual operating and capital budgets and proposes policy directions in the annual state of the city address. He also serves as the symbolic head of the city.

The city council’s responsibilities include the ability to levies taxes, enact ordinances, and license businesses. Their greatest power comes in the ability to exercise budgetary and policy control over city departments. In addition, council members serve on various committees of which the heads of the respective departments report to.

In addition to the mayor and city council, there exists a city coordinator whose job is to provide leadership and coordination of Minneapolis government and coordinates ongoing city projects established by the mayor and city council. The city coordinator has direct responsibility for the city’s administrative functions and some city services.

City Boards

Park Board

The Minneapolis Park and Recreation Board (MPRB) was established in 1883 as an elected, semi-autonomous body responsible for governing, maintaining, and developing the Minneapolis Park system. The board is comprised of nine commissioners, three of which are elected at-large. Commissioner’s responsibilities include the development of park policies, approval of the budget and operation of the park system, including the enactment of ordinances and governing the use of neighborhood and regional parks, parkways, beaches and lakes. Minneapolis is the only city of its size in the nation that currently has an elected park board.

Board of Estimate and Taxation

The board of estimate and taxation sets maximum tax levy rates for all funds involved in the budget of both the City Council and the Park Board. The Board is comprised of the Mayor, President of the City Council, Chair of Ways and Means, President of the Park Board, and two members elected at-large. There is no other comparatively sized city that has a board of taxation like the one in Minneapolis.

Addressing the Challenges

Council/Mayor and Role of the City Administrator

In a December 5, 2004, Commentary, the Minneapolis Star Tribune rightly criticized "the maddening complexity of the City's governmental structure that, whether decisions are good or bad, makes no one accountable and puts no one in charge." The lines between the policymaking responsibilities of the council and the executive authority of the mayor's office are often blurred leading many department heads to feel they have 14 bosses. The city coordinator's authority is limited to the city coordinator departments, which are primarily administrative support departments such as finance, human resources and communications. The city coordinator has no actual authority to ensure that citywide policies are implemented in all departments and, little or no ability to hold managers accountable.

The key to any successful organization, public or private, is to create clear lines of authority and the ability to hold managers accountable. Most city initiatives, from increasing efficiency of the city's regulatory process, advancing a green initiative, addressing the foreclosure crisis in our neighborhoods and increasing public safety, require departments to work together and be held accountable for results. By providing for a city administrator with broader authority, the charter change proposal will ensure that city hall can move more efficiently and effectively to implement the vision of the citizens and policymakers.

The changes recommended will reinforce the City Council as the legislative body of the City and ensure that the City is responsive to community interests and needs. The Mayor will continue to make appointments and re-appointments to the Executive Committee. The City Council will retain its authority to approve the appointment and re-appointment of the department heads, including the "City Administrator." The Mayor will continue to have an enhanced role as chair of the Executive Committee. Since the removal of a City Administrator over the mayor's objection would require a majority vote in the Executive Committee and nine votes at the City Council, the mayor will continue to have a primary role in the oversight of the City Administrator.

Park Board

The current structure of the park board – which is semi-autonomous but does not have independent levy authority – works against the principles of good government. Under the current structure, the park board does not control the setting of its annual tax levy or the amount of local government aid allocated to the Minneapolis park system. This sets up a dynamic in which elected Park Board members point the finger at the council and mayor for inadequate funding of the parks and the council and mayor point their fingers at the Park Board for poor spending decisions and inadequate long term planning. Meanwhile this does a disservice to the citizens who value a good park system but aren't sure who to hold accountable.

Many of the Park Board's activities influence city priorities outside of their traditional roles. Having two separate police departments, one for the parks and one for the city, results in excessive administration and inefficiencies. Separate long term visions for "the parks" and the rest of the city creates the potential for conflicts and prevents the creation of a unified green vision. On any number of issues including public health, riverfront development, public safety, education and youth and environmental initiatives, having two separate and independent policy boards creates a barrier to effective policymaking and a clear vision for the city.

This proposal would replace the Park Board with an appointed Advisory Board that would make recommendations on long-term service and capital planning with final decision-making authority vested in the Mayor and City Council. This would eliminate inefficiencies and create accountability while preserving a system that strongly advocates for parks.

Separate elected park boards are extremely rare. It is clear that many park systems that run without elected boards offer excellent services to their constituents. Among cities rated the highest (Boston, Cincinnati, Chicago and Denver) and as well those with the highest total per capita funding (Seattle and San Francisco), none have elected park boards. Minneapolis is also unique in the complete separation of the Minneapolis Police and Park Police Departments. Minneapolis could consolidate the departments and follow in the footsteps of cities such as Chicago, Cincinnati, and San Diego by dedicating a special unit to police the park system. Almost all other peer cities have either used a regular patrol or dedicated unit from within the department.

Board of Estimate and Taxation (BET)

It would appear that Minneapolis is the only American city to have created a board separate from the mayor and council to set the city's tax levy and authorize the issuance of bonds. The sole reason the BET exists is to somehow resolve the city's tax levy and to apportion that levy between city council and the independent boards. With the merger of the city and county library systems, the only reason for the BET is to determine the amount of the city's levy and allocate the levy between city council departments and the Minneapolis Park and Recreation Board.

The two at-large representatives generally determine the City's tax policy. The authority to determine the level of property taxes should be vested in the mayor and city Council, not in a policy body unknown to the vast majority of Minneapolitans.

Proposed Changes

City Government

Current	Proposed
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Coordinator is currently nominated by the mayor through the executive committee 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> New city administrator position is created with broader authority
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Executive Committee approves major appointments including: Police Chief, Fire Chief, City Engineer, Attorney, Assessor, City Coordinator, Civil Rights, Community Planning and Economic Development, Commissioner of Health and Family Support 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> No Change
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Each department head reports to Council and Mayor 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> All department heads report to City Administrator City Administrator has sole authority to discipline or terminate department heads City Administrator and Department heads will continue to present work plans to the council
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Executive Committee evaluates performance of city coordinator and department heads 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Executive Committee evaluates performance of City Administrator City Administrator evaluates performance of department heads
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Discipline or termination of the City Administrator would need approval of the City Council Would need a super-majority of the council to override a mayoral veto 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> No Change No Change
Park Board	
<p>Current</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Park Board runs all general park operations for the City of Minneapolis 	<p>Proposed</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Eliminate the Park Board, moving all budget and policy decision under the auspices of City Council Establish Advisory Board to the City Council and Mayor
Board of Estimate and Taxation	
<p>Current</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Board of Estimate and Taxation sets the maximum levy rates for numerous funds 	<p>Proposed</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Eliminate the Board of Estimate and Taxation Its functions move to City Council

Conclusion

Over the last decade, Minneapolis City government has adopted a number of reforms to improve city government and city services. Comprehensive business planning has been adopted, requiring departments to match programs and resources and further requiring a long-term vision for their department. The City has implemented 311, which has speeded response to requests for services and adopted performance measures to judge the speed and effectiveness of the City's response. Hennepin County has recently assumed responsibility for the library system with the recent merger of the city and county library system. The City Council has become far more disciplined in following citywide policies rather than ward-by-ward politics. Long term financial planning has been adopted resulting in a reduction of debt and structurally balanced and responsible budgets. Results Minneapolis requires departments to monitor and measure their performance.

Despite these changes, Minneapolis government cannot reach its full potential without charter reform. Because of these recent improvements in government process, the City is well positioned to benefit from a more coherent and effective form of government.

"Never in the city's history have the people of Minneapolis, acting collectively, expressed a vision for what they'd like their city to be and designed a government to get there...What they have is pretty much government by default." (*Star Tribune*, December 5, 2004). It is time in 2009 for the citizens of Minneapolis to have an opportunity to choose a form of government modeled for the challenges of the 21st Century not the 19th Century.

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