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Changing mayor's term to 4 years nixed by Col Hts City Council *Planning Commission seats expanded to 7*

by Bryan Olson — Special to the *Anoka County Record*

A proposed change to Columbia Heights' city charter was rejected by the City Council at its Feb. 12 meeting. Ordinance 1643 would have lengthened the mayor's term of office from two years to four years.

Changes to the city charter can be accomplished by a unanimous vote of the city council.

The first reading of the ordinance had been scheduled for the previous council meeting, but was cancelled due to inclement weather. The ordinarily required second reading of the ordinance at a following meeting was made moot by the council's 4-1 vote against going any further with the proposed ordinance.

Voting in favor was Connie Buesgens with Bobby Williams, John Murzyn Jr., Nick Novitsky and Mayor Donna Schmitt against.

The proposal will go back to the Charter Commission which next meets on April 19. The commission can choose to put the question on the general election ballot this November, and do so by a simple majority vote of the 15 members. The Charter Commission could also modify the proposed new language and start the process over again, or not pursue the matter. State and county election officials have to be notified in by late August if questions are to be placed on the general election ballot. The same proposal was put before city voters in 1998 and was defeated.

To argue for the longer mayoral term, Buesgens said that fellow councilor Bobby Williams and previous councilor and mayor Bruce Nawrocki had the advantage of name recognition, something she said is expensive to buy. (Williams is a long-time gas station operator who was first elected to the city council in 2000. Nawrocki was first elected in 1961 and later served as mayor for several years).

Buesgens claimed the city "has had approximately a 60 percent turnover in population in the last ten years" and that it's difficult for new residents to establish themselves in the way that Williams, Nawrocki, former mayor Gary Peterson, and several others "have had name recognition for at least 30 years, and at least 20 years since I moved here."



Denelle Bing, a Columbia Heights resident, agreed with councilor Buesgens' comments regarding the mayor needing a longer term to acclimate to the position. Bing was an applicant for appointment to the city council last year. (Columbia Heights city council telecast)

“Folks aren’t as known as they were in years past; it takes money to get your name out there.” She spoke from experience, citing it costs “\$1500 for a bulk mailing to the entire city; \$750 for a small ad in the *Northeaster* (newspaper), \$500 for those door knockers they put on your doors, and \$400 for signs.” Buesgens added that if the candidate is not a graphic artist to do those signs, that is another expense.

She also repeated comments that had been made by others at recent Charter Commission meetings — that the mayor needs a longer period of time to acclimate to the position. The same comment was made at this meeting by citizen speaker Andy Smoka, although he stated he favored no change to the charter. Buesgens’ list also said a majority of cities in the state have 4-year terms for mayor. (The *Record* has previously reported that in Anoka County, there are 12 cities with 2-year mayoral terms and 8 with 4-year terms).

“I tend to favor the four-year term because I don’t want to discourage people to not run because of the cost . . . it’s very expensive,” Buesgens concluded.

Murzyn Jr. said he believes citizens should vote on the question rather than the city council make the decision. Novitsky agreed, but he disagreed with Buesgens’ presentation regarding campaign expenses. He said he didn’t believe it was difficult to campaign with little money. To his comment, “I door knocked and made my own flyers,” Buesgens reminded him that those efforts did not win him the council seat, and that he was now on the council by appointment. Novitsky reiterated, “you don’t have to spend money to get your name out there — there’s other ways to be involved.”



Planning Commission expanded

Applications for two seats on the Columbia Heights Planning Commission are now being taken. The reason behind the recruiting effort stems from the expansion of the commission from five seats to seven. Staff mentioned at a previous council meeting that it has been difficult to hold meetings and votes due to absenteeism of the members.

The commission will drop the “and Zoning” portion of its name and become simply the “Planning Commission.” Meetings will move up an hour to begin at 6:00 p.m. The members will choose their Chair, Vice Chair and Recording Secretary annually. (The secretary does not have to be a Planning Commission member).

A four-fifths vote of the City Council can appoint or remove a commission member; terms (4 years) will be staggered so that one seat will expire each year. The Community Development director, City Planner, Building Official and City Attorney will be ex-officio members of the commission.

An attendance requirement that a member must attend three-fourths of the commission’s regular meetings (first Tuesday of the month) was also added. Failing the attendance requirement, the member would be subject to removal. The city council approved the new Ordinance 1645 by consent at the Feb. 12 meeting. — *ACR*

Previous coverage of the Columbia Heights Charter Commission:

July 25, 2017 • Oct. 31, 2017 • Jan. 30, 2018

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East Bethel-Ham Lake legislator previews new session



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This week marked the start of the 2018 legislative session. Though it's a shorter session, there is still plenty to accomplish. I want to give you a quick preview of what I see as some of the major issues facing us this session.

One of the major areas we will look to tackle is conformity with the new federal tax code. Republicans in Washington passed a massive tax relief package that is already paying dividends for families in Minnesota and across the country. However, this creates a challenge at the state level as we will need to conform to the new tax code. This sounds simple, but we need to make sure we do this in a way that provides the intended tax relief for Minnesotans. It could be a lengthy process, but I'm confident we can help to further ease the tax burden for our residents.

Heading into this year, we will also take a look at the state's new licensing system, MNLARS. If you have transferred a title or tried to get new tabs since July, you have likely experienced delays, shutdowns, or your order still hasn't been processed. The root of the problem is MNLARS, a \$100 million, 10-year project that produced a system wrought with issues. Despite numerous assurances from those in charge of MNLARS, the system is still broken with no fixes in sight. In fact, the Minnesota Department of Public Safety came to the legislature asking for almost \$50 million MORE. The utter waste of taxpayer dollars is shocking, and we need to make sure the state gets this system working without wasting more of your tax dollars.

Personally, I would like to see the legislature make significant reforms to the Metropolitan Council. These unelected leaders are appointed by the governor, yet have the authority to levy a tax. Since they are not elected, they are only accountable to the sitting governor. It's wrong for this much influence to be in the hands of unelected officials. We need to look at all avenues — including making the TAB function a stand-alone function — in order to give taxpayers more say in these large decisions.

Also, I'm working on a bill to eliminate the Minnesota commercial truck inspection requirement. Federal law already requires an inspection. Having our own inspection program is duplicative and an unnecessary use of resources. As legislators, we must identify and fix all areas of waste and duplication no matter the size.

With session starting, I welcome any calls, emails, or visits to the Capitol so you can share your opinion with me. Feel free to contact me any time at 651-296-2439 or rep.cal.bahr@house.mn.