

# SHOWING INITIATIVE

**A petition to restructure the Portland City Council reflects one man's quest for better government** by Timothy Krause

**I**t's often hard for people that are on the inside of the establishment to stand up and be changed," Robert Ball says. "You have to have someone who has the interest, the resources, the desire and the belief in an idea."

Ball thinks he is that someone. And the establishment he wishes to change is the Portland City Council. This gay reserve police captain and real estate investor filed a petition June 12 with City Hall on behalf of the Good Government Committee seeking to change city government into a council-and-mayor format.

"Portland is the largest city in the United States that continues to operate under the commission form of government," says Ball, chief petitioner for the initiative. "As our city grows and becomes more diverse, it is important that we, as citizens, are involved in council decisions."

Ball, 35, traces the roots of his civic activism back to Jan. 15, 1995, when he was held up at gunpoint outside the home he and his life partner share in Northwest Portland. He decided public safety was an important issue and began to volunteer at the local community policing office. He soon joined the police reserve program, where he has had the opportunity to see city government from the inside.

Ball considered challenging Mayor Vera Katz in last year's election. Before his campaign got off the ground, however, a business opportunity arose to renovate the Pearl District's historic Marshall-Wells warehouse building. His professional career led him from seeking office to selling lofts, but certain issues continued to resonate with this young politician.

"One of the things that came to me was that people were feeling more disconnected with City Hall," he states. "So, I started to research why we are having this disconnect."

He began reading everything he could about city administration and representative government. At his own expense, he traveled to cities such as San Francisco, Denver and Phoenix to study model administrations in action. After more than a year of investigation, Ball established the



Robert Ball says his plan will improve diversity, local representation and division of powers

people is a natural conflict. It's the climate not to question another commissioner's business. We've had a history of known turf battles, but this [petition] will allow all of our bureaus to work under one common, united vision."

The Good Government Committee's initiative seeks to divide the policymaking and administrative duties into distinct branches. City Council members would set policy, while the mayor, no longer a member of the City Council, would administer professionally managed city bureaus.

The amendment also increases the number of council members to nine. Two council members and the mayor would continue to be elected at large. The remaining seven members would be elected by districts roughly equivalent in population. The districts initially would be drawn by the council but would be reviewed with every federal census or annexation.

Greater diversity among city commissioners is another anticipated benefit, says Ball, who cites recent census data revealing 25 percent of Portland residents are ethnic minorities. District elections not only would encourage wider geographic representation but also would foster other demographic diversity. Rather than a large, city-wide campaign, elections within a district would be smaller and less expensive.

"Politics used to be going out, shaking hands, talking about issues, meeting people and understanding what their concerns are," Ball says. "We don't have that in our city. We get a flier in the mail or what we see on television. This will be an opportunity for somebody who doesn't

have as much money to run, because the cost of elections will be less."

And he sees this diversity extending to Portland's sexual minorities community simply by increasing the opportunity to participate.

"This initiative will give all minorities a better chance to be on our City Council," he suggests. "I think we're very close to having a member of the LGBT community on our City Council. I would anticipate that, with a greater number of opportunities, we would see more diverse representation."

For the petition to appear on the May 2002 ballot, 26,095 valid signatures must be gathered by Jan. 21. Ball indicates the committee will use a combination of paid and volunteer signature gatherers, many of whom will go door to door.

"We have a plan to get there," Ball states confidently, "and the reaction so far has been fantastic."

The Good Government Committee's plan included a strategic decision not to reveal the petition to the public before it was filed with the city. Ball explains

he wanted to prevent any misconceptions until its content was finalized. Although he is meeting with each of the commissioners, he recognizes the petition might have come as a surprise to some.

"They listened, and I felt that was great,"

Ball says of the city's elected officials. "You've got to believe that they want to do what's right for the community."

Commissioner Jim Francesconi says he has yet to examine the petition in detail but comments: "I believe our current system

is very responsive to the citizens and has worked very well for years. But I also believe it is difficult to stick with a strategic plan and that the council could be more diverse."

Commissioner Dan Saltzman says: "One definite impact is that citizens would have a local representative from their area of Portland on the City Council. It could be argued, though, that on a nine-person council, these council members' ability to influence policy would be more limited than the current five-person structure. The council members would also lose their current ability to enact direct administrative controls over city bureaus, which may be a good thing. The proposed changes would heighten the management qualifications of the mayor as well, since that position would be the chief executive of the city government."

Commissioner Charlie Hales declined to comment. At press time Commissioner Erik Sten had yet to meet with Ball and Katz's office had not returned calls. [M]

Further information about the GOOD GOVERNMENT COMMITTEE and its petition is available online at [www.portlandgoodgov.org](http://www.portlandgoodgov.org) or by calling 503-226-4663.

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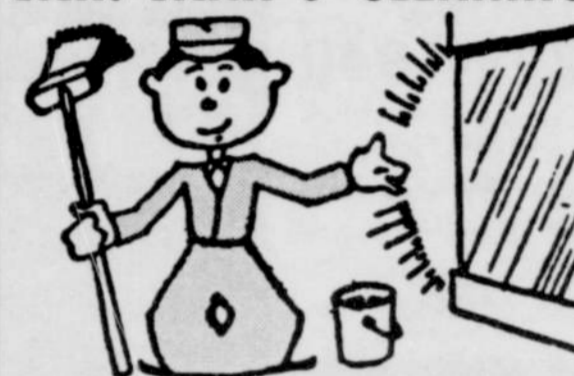


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## DIFFERENT SINCE 1913

Former council clerk Cay Kershner writes on the city's Internet site at [www.ci.portland.or.us](http://www.ci.portland.or.us): "[Portland's] commission form of government differs from most municipal governments in that its members (four commissioners and the mayor) serve both as the city's legislative body and as administrators of city departments, individually overseeing bureaus and carrying out policies approved by the council while wearing its legislative hat. The assignment of departments and bureaus is determined by the mayor and may be changed at her/his discretion. Council members also act in a quasi-judicial capacity when hearing land-use and other types of appeals."

Good Government Committee and finalized an outline for a new municipal government featuring what he describes as separate but balanced powers.

"Many of the limitations of our elected officials are not because of their not wanting to do a great job but because the system does not allow them to," he says. "Having to run several bureaus and do the best job that they can do representing