

# Labor opposes 'strong mayor' form of government

Organized labor is lining up in opposition to a May ballot measure that seeks to change how the City of Portland is governed.

A Charter Review Commission appointed by Mayor Tom Potter is recommending that the current "commission form of government" be replaced with a "strong mayor" form of government.

The Portland City Council had to approve moving the Charter Review Commission's recommendations to the ballot, which it did 3-2. Commissioners Erik Sten and Randy Leonard cast the dissenting votes.

It is those two commissioners who are leading the campaign against Mea-

sure 26-91, although last week Commissioner Sam Adams said he opposes the measure.

The Committee for Accountable City Government has been created and political strategist Mark Wiener has been called on to help with strategy.

Joining the opposition campaign are the Northwest Oregon Labor Council, Portland Fire Fighters Local 43, Portland City Employees Local 189, an affiliate of the American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees; and Laborers Municipal Employees Local 483.

The Fire Fighters contributed \$35,000 to the campaign, the Laborers kicked in \$10,000, and AFSCME will

donate cash and open its office for phone banking and other campaign assistance.

Portland voters have been asked seven times since 1913 to vote on replacing the commission form of government. Each time it has been rejected.

"It really doesn't make sense," said Richard Beetle, business manager of Laborers Local 483, which represents 900 blue-collar employees at the city. "It wraps all the power around one person, with a layer of protection by a chief administrative officer."

Measure 26-91 proposes to strip all city bureaus away from commissioners and put them under the control of a

chief administrative officer appointed by the mayor. The CAO must be confirmed by the City Council, but cannot be fired by the Council. Commissioners would be relegated to legislative oversight, strategic planning and policy development.

A key argument for reforming the system is that most other cities the size of Portland operate under a "strong mayor" format.

"Just because other cities do it, doesn't mean it's right for Portland," said Judy O'Connor, executive secretary-treasurer of the Northwest Oregon Labor Council. "Maybe we're the ones that have it right."

O'Connor was one of 26 citizens Potter appointed to a charter review committee in November 2005. The committee was charged with reviewing the city charter and recommending changes. O'Connor opposed the strong mayor format.

James Hester, a business representative of AFSCME Oregon Council 75 assigned to Local 189, said that passing such sweeping structural changes to city government requires a "thorough and thoughtful" process.

"This can have a very serious impact on the whole city, not just union employees," Hester said. "Citizens need to be informed of what these changes mean. That hasn't happened at all."

In testimony prior to the City Council vote to refer the ballot measure, Ed Hall, a firefighter and another union member on the Charter Review Commission, asked City commissioners not to do it. "The effort and time the (Charter Review) commission put in deserve a full public debate," he said, adding that there isn't enough time to have that debate before May 15.

Beetle agreed that more public forums are needed to allow citizens to be able to make an informed decision.

"Fast-tracking this to a May election, which guarantees a low voter turnout, with no public process and created by a select group of people ... it sounds like they're trying to pull something on the public," he said.

Commissioner Sten, appearing before the Executive Board of the Northwest Oregon Labor Council on Feb. 26, said that a strong mayor political structure "is a very corporate model — you deal with the CEO, that's it."

Sten said under a strong mayor system elected officials rarely are held accountable if something goes wrong.

Under the current system in Portland, citizens at least have an elected official they can contact if they don't like something. Sten said no one supporting the strong mayor reform has defined specific problems with the current system.

The Charter Review Committee actually forwarded four amendments to the May ballot. The three others are:

**Measure 26-89** would require the City to review its charter at least every 10 years. A 20-member commission would be formed to review the charter, with super-majority authority (15 or more votes) to forward changes to the ballot box without Council approval.

**Measure 26-90** would change Civil Service language by increasing the number of classifications that could serve as "at will" employees.

**Measure 26-92** would increase oversight of the Portland Development Commission by requiring PDC to adhere to the City Council's vision, goals, budget process and performance measures.

The aforementioned unions and labor council oppose all but the PDC oversight measure, which they strongly support.

Ballots will hit mailboxes starting April 27. Election day is May 15.

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## Machinists, Teachers, Steelworkers unions plan conventions in Portland

Hilton Portland & Executive Tower, a unionized hotel and meeting space, will be the site of three major union conferences in the next month.

The 100,000-strong Aerospace Division of the International Association of Machinist (IAM) will hold its conference there March 27-31. More than 200 delegates from the United States and Canada will take part in the five-day meeting, which will include trainings and discussions of how to expand membership and protect North American aerospace-industry jobs. Oregon Governor Ted Kulongoski and Labor Commissioner Dan Gardner are expected to address delegates.

The 160,000-member Higher Education Division of American Federation of Teachers (AFT) will hold its annual issues conference March 29 to

April 1. Over 300 local leaders are expected to attend. This year's conference will focus on a campaign to reverse the decline in pay and job security that college teaching faculty have suffered in recent years.

And the 42,000-member District 12 of the United Steelworkers will hold its conference April 11-14, drawing 250 to 300 delegates from 11 Western states. The conference is held every three years and includes several days of training for officers and elected delegates. This will be the district's first conference in Portland. The Steelworkers Union has branched out from the steel and aluminum industries in recent years and added workers in papermaking, the rubber industry, health care and the public sector.