

# May ballot will recommend changes to Portland's charter

Next week, Oregonians will begin receiving ballots for the May 15 special election. On that ballot in Portland will be four measures that could dramatically change how government operates in the City of Roses.

If you recall, in November 2005

Portland Mayor Tom Potter assembled a citizen Charter Review Commission to review the City Charter (basically the city's constitution). After more than a year of meetings the Commission came up with four recom-

mended changes to the city charter, all of which will appear on the ballot, in four separate measures.

The charter changes include: Measure 26-89 – implementation of periodic charter review; Measure 26-90 – Portland's Civil Service system; Measure 26-91 – Portland's form of city government; and Measure 26-92 – the Portland Development Commission and its relationship to the City.

Portland area labor unions and labor councils are supporting only one of the four proposals — Measure 26-92, which, specifically, 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. PDC is the economic development arm of the City. PDC's commissioners are appointed by the mayor and confirmed by the City Council.

City Commissioner Randy Leonard said PDC is the only agency in the state — with a taxpayer financed budget of nearly \$250 million a year — “with absolutely no oversight by an elected official. It's wrong. And it has to change,” he said.

Labor is actively opposing the other three charter change measures.

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 City Council approval.

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

Measure 26-91 seeks to change the current “commission form of city government” and replace it with a “strong mayor” form of government.

Most of the arguments against Measure 26-91 are similar: It gives the mayor too much power.

## Labor unions and councils are supporting only one of the four proposals — Measure 26-92, dealing with PDC.

City Government, said at an April 10 debate hosted by the League of Women Voters. “Is it great because of, or in spite of, its commission form of government?”

Smith said opponents of the measure firmly believe that the commission form of government has contributed to Portland's prosperity, livability and active culture of citizen engagement.

Proponents of Measure 26-91 say the commission form of government is “outdated bureaucracy” that is costing the city \$10 million to \$15 million each year. The proposed new system “breaks down the walls of city bureaus, it does away with duplication and puts it in the hands of professional managers,” said Bob Ball, a member of the Charter Review Commission.

Smith said the Charter Review recommendation isn't about saving

money, “it's about who controls the power in the city.” Under the proposal, the mayor would make all appointments and still maintain a vote on the five-person City Council. “If you think developers hold sway in City Hall now, wait and see what happens under the strong mayor style,” he said.

Proponents of Measure 26-90, the change in Civil Service language, also cite “efficiencies” as a major reason for the change. The Charter Review Committee's proposal whittles down eight pages of Civil Service language currently in the City Charter to just two pages. It does so by eliminating what it says are outdated, conflicting and confusing language.

Labor unions say the measure will increase the number of “at-will” employees at the city and eliminate all language referring to how many temporary employees the city can hire.

Under the current charter, the city is restricted to using temp workers no more than 860 hours a year. Rob Wheaton, a business representative of Laborers Municipal Employees Local 483, said at the League of Women Voters debate that the city already circumvents the rules by laying off temp workers for a certain amount of time before rehiring them ... as temps.

Without the specific language in the charter, he said there is no telling how many more temp workers the city would hire.

Labor's argument against Measure 26-89 is that a commission that has

not been elected by a vote of the people should not have the power to refer Charter changes to the ballot (in either a primary or general election) without approval by elected officials.

And though the four ballot measures are a package deal from the Charter Review Commission, they can win voter approval separately. For instance, if Measure 26-91 is approved and city government is converted to a strong mayor, but Measure 26-89 — which requires periodic review of the

charter — fails, Portland could be stuck with a strong mayor format for decades. Vice versa, if the strong mayor proposal fails and the periodic charter review measure passes, the form of city government issue could resurface.

Many political pundits believe voters will reject all the measures simply because they don't understand them. That could be a problem for the labor unions supporting Measure 26-92, the PDC oversight measure.

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