



# CITY HALL OVERHAUL

*Portlanders fed up with the 'tyranny of the majority' are pushing for a City Council made up of district representatives in lieu of at-large commissioners. And they believe that this time, the effort stands a chance.*

**BY THOMAS BUELL JR.**  
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Deborah Harris ran for mayor of Portland because she believed African-Americans like her needed a stronger voice in city government. She saw how skyrocketing housing costs, homelessness and other issues were taking a disproportionate toll on people of color, and she thought that running for the city's highest office was the best way – perhaps the only way – for her to make a difference.

But when the ballots were tallied in May, Harris came up with less than 1 percent of the 193,000 votes cast.

In many other U.S. cities, Harris might have considered running for a city council seat representing her neighborhood. She could rally the support of her neighbors, campaign on local issues, and then carry their voices to the halls of city government.

But not in Portland.

The city that is seen as one of the most progressive in the nation is the only major metropolitan area in the United States still using what many experts on the subject consider to be a distinctly non-progressive form of government – a small city commission composed of five members, all

elected on an at-large basis in what is known as a weak-mayor system.

While much attention was paid to the election won by State Treasurer Ted Wheeler, the title of Portland mayor is largely ceremonial. In reality, the mayor is just another city commissioner, sharing voting power equally with four other commissioners. The mayor wields no veto pen and has no hiring/firing power or other particular leadership authority except to assign bureaus and propose budgets.



Deborah Harris

Past Portland mayors have made names for themselves more by the powers of persuasion and personality than by political fiat. Consider Vera Katz, who, during her three terms from 1993 to 2005, channeled her larger-than-life persona to promote bike-friendly streets and the revitalization of certain city neighborhoods.

But some wonder if the commission form of government is up to addressing Portland's 21st-century challenges of burgeoning growth, gentrification, homelessness and boomtown-style real estate development.

Passed as an anti-corruption model in 1913 and

having survived eight votes to change it since, most recently in 2007, Portland's commission form of government could now be seen as regressive, even racist, said Karen Abrams, an urban affairs specialist recently named a Loeb Fellow at Harvard University's Graduate School of Design.

"This kind of reminds me of the 'tyranny of the majority,' said Abrams, a Harlem, N.Y., native who has spent the past five years managing community outreach at the Urban Redevelopment Authority in Pittsburgh, another city facing challenges of growth.

"At-large commissioners may feel beholden to the thoughts of the majority, while suppressing rightful representation of minority voices," she said. "And it is critical that traditionally underserved communities, which have and continue to face discrimination and racism, be represented by people they are able to elect."

It's as simple as that, says Paul T. McCoy, a small business owner in Northeast Portland, and son of Gladys McCoy, the first African-American member of the Portland School Board and later the first black person to chair the Multnomah County Board of Commissioners.

"The Portland City Commission was never

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