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Mayor Power

Race for 'ceremonial' job has a lot at stake.

The Eugene City Charter gives the mayor little explicit power. He can't tell anyone what to do, and he only gets to vote in case of a city council tie.

But then why are conservative Nancy Nathanson and progressive Kitty Piercy spending tens of thousands of dollars in a hotly contested race for mayor? A look at how the city really works reveals the mayor's job is far more than ceremonial.

With the community and city council often split on important issues, the mayor's ability to break tie votes can be a lot more powerful than it sounds. In the past five years, Mayor Jim Torrey has broken ties on major issues 13 times. Without Torrey's pro-big business and developer tie-breaking votes, big box stores might face a moratorium, the West Eugene Parkway might have been stopped, sprawl subsidies may have been cut, a new riverfront highway downtown might have been blocked, a new rental housing code might protect students and the poor, Hynix might not have gotten \$2 million in tax breaks and city council wards wouldn't have been gerrymandered to make the council more conservative.

council appoints a permanent replacement. In recent years, these "temporary" appointments chosen by the mayor alone have served longer than the permanent managers the council has appointed.

The mayor's powerful influence also extends beyond city hall.

Local TV stations and *The Register-Guard* feature statements from Torrey "very predominately in many, many stories," Bettman says. "He's practically the spokesperson for the city."

With such media exposure, as well as speaking engagements, the mayor "sets the tone for the city" and his characterizations of city issues, policies and initiatives become the conventional wisdom, according to Bettman.

"He has a very significant bully pulpit," Kelly says.

The city charter calls for the mayor to give an annual state of the city address. While the mayor often doesn't always get what he wants, Kelly says staff often use the mayor's speech to focus city staff and money on accomplishing his goals.

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The mayor also has the power to veto city council ordinances. This has very rarely happened in Eugene, and a two-thirds council vote can override a veto. But the council did recently pull protections for transgender people out of a human rights ordinance after Mayor Torrey threatened to veto it.

The lack of a mayoral veto can also be critical, says councilor David Kelly. If the mayor has the backing of a strong council majority for his policies, "his power is unlimited," Kelly says.

The real power in Eugene's form of government is not with elected officials, but with the unelected city manager and his staff. Under the city charter, the manager hires, fires and commands all city employees and city contractors. The council appoints and fires the city manager and can only control and direct the city through its influence on the manager. And the mayor has much more influence than individual councilors.

City staff often look to the mayor as the representative of the will of the entire city rather than just the individual wards councilors were elected in, says councilor Kelly.

The mayor's office in city hall with a secretary and next to the city manager's office is also vitally important, councilor Bonny Bettman says. The office means frequent contact with the manager and other staff. Councilors who don't have individual city hall offices can feel out of the loop when it comes to important city issues. But Bettman says the mayor "is not only in the loop, he is the loop."

"The mayor meets with department managers a whole lot more than individual councilors," Kelly agrees.

The mayor also has the major power to appoint temporary city managers until the

Another power source for the mayor is appointments. The mayor appoints councilors and citizens to the city's dozens of committees, often with little council oversight.

Some committees wield considerable power, Bettman says. The Metropolitan Planning Commission decides how to spend millions in road money, for example.

A new economic development committee recently appointed by the mayor is heavily weighted toward tax break supporters and could result in a new wave of local corporate welfare, critics have charged.

The mayor also plays a strong role in setting the local policy agenda. It takes four councilors to get an item on the city agenda. But the mayor only needs the agreement of the city manager, who very rarely blocks his requests in weekly agenda meetings, according to Kelly. In terms of agenda setting, "the mayor has four times the power of any councilor."

The mayor presides over council meetings. Kelly says Torrey almost always does an impartial job of handling turns to speak. But the councilor says if the presiding wasn't done fairly, "it could have a powerful effect."

Many of the mayor's powers depend on others going along with it. A conservative manager and staff could choose to ignore a more liberal mayor. The conservative mainstream media could also ignore a liberal mayor despite the bully pulpit. Councilors could vote to change the rules for who makes committee appointments and sets meeting agendas and could direct staff to pursue their goals and not the mayor's.

But even then, the mayor would still hold a key focal point of local government. "The mayor's office is about leadership," Bettman says.

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