

AUDITING CITY HALL

Charter amendment would establish independent auditor's office to save city money

A large calendar sits on Bonny McCornack's dinner table. She looks at it, expecting a long process ahead for submitting a ballot measure to the city of Eugene. McCornack says she's not sure whether the ballot title — to be written by the city attorney — will need to be appealed, which could hold off this measure's appearance on a ballot or even force it to appear on a low-voter-turnout election.

She worries because this, she says, is a ballot measure the city of Eugene doesn't want passed.

McCornack, a former Eugene Ward 1 city councilor, along with three other residents, plans to file a ballot measure for a city charter amendment to create an Office of Independent Audits. An elected auditor would lead this office, which would review all city operations.

Proponents need to collect 8,091 signatures — 15 percent of the votes cast for mayor — in 90 days to get the measure on a future ballot.

If the measure passes, the auditor would conduct performance, financial or any other form of review necessary to investigate reports of fraud, waste or abuse, McCornack says.

The purpose of the auditor's position, she tells *Eugene Weekly*, is to assist the Eugene City Council, residents and city officials in working toward a more accountable and

transparent government. An auditor, she says, can help the city spend its money more effectively.

"Pretty much everybody agrees that if you can get in there and provide services more efficiently without waste and abuse, and cost-effectively, you can save money," she says. "So you're getting 100-percent service for every dollar you're spending."

The lead auditor would be an elected position, she says, giving the office independence from city hall. "There has to be a firewall between management and the auditor. The only way to do that is to have them elected," McCornack says.

The charter amendment would also provide an anonymous hotline for residents to report any observed fraud and abuse to an auditor.

McCornack refers to a 2016 report issued by the Association of Certified Fraud Examiners stating that a typical organization loses about 5 percent of its annual revenues to fraud; anonymous hotlines have been instrumental in reporting this to auditors.

"It may not be that high, but it's there and has to be addressed," McCornack says.

The elected auditor would be a full-time position with a small staff. The new jobs would be paid for from city funds, drawing less than .12 percent of the city's operating budget, she says.

Gary Blackmer contributed some advice to the group in Eugene working on this charter amendment. Blackmer retired as Oregon State Auditor in 2015 after 30 years of public auditing with the city of Portland as well as Multnomah County. In his experience, he says, audit offices in governments not only save money but also save lives.

"This charter involves looking at performance auditing," Blackmer says. "It's how to address problems. It's more about fine-tuning organizations. The key role is making government better. Auditors are the last bastions of independent trust."

The auditors rely upon social-scientific methods to inform their decisions, he adds. Through evidence gathering, data collection and conducting interviews, auditors make recommendations on how to find solutions to problems within government departments.

"Agencies trust auditors," Blackmer explains. "They'll ask for auditors to look at something. It may not be good news, but it can make it into a good program."

If this passes, he adds, Eugene would join more than 250 cities such as Oakland, Long Beach and Portland in having an Office of Independent Audits.

"It has the added advantage with transparency and accountability," McCornack says. "Now you're helping to restore trust between local government and voters." ■



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