



Common Council City of Albany, New York

Notice of Public Hearing

Committee on Council Operations and Ethics Richard Conti, Chair

Wednesday, March 30 at 7 PM
Albany City Hall
Eagle Street

Wednesday, April 6 at 7 PM
Pine Hills Branch Public Library,
517 Western Avenue

Wednesday, April 13 at 7 PM
Albany Housing Authority
200 South Pearl Street

Wednesday, April 27 at 7 PM
Albany Community Development Agency
200 Henry Johnson Blvd. (2nd floor)

Topic: Proposals to Restructure the Albany Common Council

Two proposals are currently pending to restructure the Albany Common Council (including reducing the size). Any restructuring of the Council would be through an amendment to the Albany City Charter subject to voter approval through a public referendum. As the City of Albany prepares to reapportion Common Council wards to reflect 2010 U. S. Census population figures it is important to consider these proposals in a manner which maximizes public input. The purpose of these public hearings is to receive public testimony with regard to pending proposals (as summarized below) or other recommendations with regard to restructuring of the Common Council.

Summary of Pending Proposals

Local Law E of 2010 would reduce the size of the Common Council from not more than 15 members to not more than 9 members. In addition, Local Law E would eliminate the position of Common Council President as a separately elected city-wide office and instead provide that the Council President be elected by majority vote of the members of the Common Council. Local Law E would allocate savings from a smaller Common Council (primarily expenditure reductions for salaries and benefits) as follows:

- Fifty-Two percent returned to the general fund;
- Thirty percent to support enhanced staffing for the Common Council;
- Eighteen percent as a salary enhancement to the remaining 9 members of the Common Council to reflect representation of larger districts.

It is anticipated that Local Law E would result in a potential net expenditure reduction of approximately \$640,000 over a four year period.

Local Law F of 2010 is similar to Local Law E except that it would reduce the size of the Common Council to not more than 7 members and provide that all savings from a smaller Common Council be returned to the general fund. Local Law F contains the same provision regarding President of the Common Council as Local law E. It is anticipated that Local Law F would result in a potential net expenditure reduction of approximately \$1.25 million over a four year period.

Discussion

Albany's Common Council is currently comprised of 15 members and a separately elected Council President. The size of Albany's Common Council is larger than that of neighboring municipalities and cities of comparable or larger size. It has been argued that a smaller body would be more cohesive and serve as a stronger check and balance to the executive branch of government.

The Common Council also needs adequate resources to support its role as the policy making body of government; Local Law E would reinvest a portion of the savings from reducing the size of the Council into the new smaller body.

As a separately elected official, the Council President presides at Council meetings and votes only in the event of a tie. The Council President is also a member of the Board of Estimate and Apportionment and the Board of the Albany Community Development Agency. The Council President succeeds to the office of Mayor in the event of a vacancy. As a separately elected official the Council President is not accountable to the Common Council as a whole or representative of the Council. It has been argued that the duties and responsibilities of a separately elected President of the Common Council are better exercised by a member of the Common Council elected by Council Members. This would strengthen the position of President of the Common Council as an office which is representative of the Council.

It has also been argued that at a time when Albany is facing significant financial challenges, the Common Council should be streamlined to provide budgetary savings.

Some argue that the current size of Albany's Common Council is appropriate and that it provides better representation by having elected officials that are closer to the residents they represent. Council Members are expected to do constituent work, attend neighborhood meetings, assure that neighborhood issues are adequately addressed by City agencies, and engage in policy initiatives that affect the city as a whole. A smaller Council may stretch Council Members too far and impede the ability to adequately represent constituents.

It has also been argued that reducing the size of Albany's Common Council would reduce the number of people of color elected to the Council. This reduction in number would not be alleviated by increasing the percentage of Council members of color.

It also has been argued that a separately elected Council President elected by the voter's city-wide preserves the independence of that office and should the Council President need to succeed to the office of Mayor in the event of a vacancy, it is better that it be a person elected by the voters rather than the Council.

While many have pointed to larger cities in New York State that have smaller city council's than Albany, those city's often provide their council members greater staff resources and compensation than Albany does. If Albany reduces the size of its Council, should additional resources be invested to enhance staffing?

In addition to local legislative bodies that are elected from individual districts, some cities have a mix of members elected by neighborhood-based district and city-wide. Should some of the voting members of Albany's Common Council be elected by district and the others city-wide? In theory, Council Members elected city-wide would bring a broader perspective to Council deliberations vs. a perspective that might be limited to a particular district.

Public Testimony

Residents of the City of Albany are invited to speak at the public hearings to express their thoughts with regard to the future structure of Albany's Common Council. There is no need to register in advance. Public comment should be limited to five minutes, written comments are also accepted. If you have any questions, require further information, a copy of the proposed local laws or wish to submit written comments, please contact Cashawna Parker as indicated below.

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