

**City Club of Portland**  
**City Government & Equity Research Charge**  
January, 2017

**Contents**

Background.....1  
Study Objectives .....1  
Scope & Limits of the Report.....3  
Current Issues and Challenges.....3  
Outline of Report .....3  
Timeframe .....4  
Chronological Work Plan .....4  
Potential Key Resources .....4  
Potential Key Witnesses .....6

**Background**

In 2018, the City of Portland Charter Review Commission will meet for the first time since 2011. The 2017 work session presents an opportunity for Portland to assess the current form of government and consider alternatives. Is the current form of government the most appropriate to meet the current needs of the city’s population? Does the current government structure conform to more recently adopted guidelines for governance adopted by the city, such as the objectives of the Office of Equity?

Portland has the last remaining Commission form of government among large cities in the United States. Under Portland’s city charter, the city is governed by a commission comprised of a mayor and four full-time commissioners, all elected at large in nonpartisan elections. Portland’s government does not separate executive and legislative functions. The mayor and the four commissioners serve as the legislative body — developing policy, setting the city’s budget, and passing ordinances. All five members of the commission also serve as executive heads of bureaus assigned by the mayor. The mayor and commissioners hire professional managers to run the day-to-day operations of their bureaus. The full City Council also acts in a quasi-judicial capacity when hearing land-use and other appeals. The mayor and the four commissioners each have one vote and are generally equal in rank and power.

Cities with a population greater than 200,000 are more likely to use district voting (45%) or a mixed system (39%). Challenges to the Commission form of government have been mounted on the local, state, and national levels. The 1982 amendments of the 1965 Voting Rights Act allowed voting laws to be struck down if the laws were found discriminatory. This allowed citizens to sue their local and state governments for the structure of their elections. Cities of Springfield, Illinois and Dallas, Texas in 1987 and 1990, respectively, lost lawsuits and were forced to change to district style voting.

Cities and states across the country have moved to district representation in response to both legal challenges and popular support. Detroit changed to districts in 2013 partially in response to concerns about representation of Hispanic voters. While 7% of the population was Hispanic at the time, one district was 47% Hispanic.

Portland's Commission form of government faces two main criticisms. First, because Commissioners are elected at-large, there is a sense among some that they are not able to equally representing all members of the city's population. Citywide problems and issues overshadow the concerns of small neighborhoods and populations with less influence. Second, each of the commissioners serves as administrator of various city departments. Regardless of their experience or knowledge, Commissioners are tasked with overseeing departments such as the Bureau of Environmental Services or the Parks Bureau.

Since Portland voters approved the commission form of government at the ballot in 1913, there have been six ballot measures aimed at changing Portland's form of government and another two designed to "simplify and retain commission form of government." All eight have been rejected by voters. The most recent rejected change occurred in May 2007 when the City's Charter Review Commission recommended replacing "the current form of government with a governing structure where the mayor is held accountable for a chief administrative officer who runs the day to day operation of the City and City Council members focus on setting policy, approving budgets, exercising legislative and quasi-judicial authority, and representing the citizens of Portland," according to the explanatory statement<sup>1</sup>.

## Study Objectives

In 2018, the City of Portland Charter Review Commission has an opportunity to examine and proposed recommended reforms to Portland's hundred-year old structure of government. City Club of Portland has convened a research committee to propose a structure of government that best represents all Portland citizens, with a focus on equitable representation for historically disenfranchised communities, as well current geographic and socioeconomic disparities.

The goal of this study is to provide the following:

- A brief account of the history and evolution of Portland's city government to provide context to recommendations.
- An analysis of the effects that Portland's commission form of government/alternative forms of city government can have on representation for the citizens of Portland.
- A set of recommendations that address the challenges that the people of Portland face in regards to representation in city government.

To address these objectives, the committee should focus on the following questions:

1. In 2017, what is the best form of government in terms of representation for the citizens of Portland?
  - a. Does the current commission form of government equitably represent all residents of the city?

---

<sup>1</sup> <https://multco.us/elections/may-15-2007-measure-no-26-91>

2. How should we choose our representatives? (Options include electing at large by position number; at large by popular vote; ward system; term limits; hybrid of the above).

## Scope & Limits of the Report

The committee should primarily address whether the City of Portland's current form of government provides equitable representation of all residents, or what changes need to be made to our current form of government to best serve the citizens of Portland. While a brief study of the history and evolution of Portland's form of government will provide useful context, a historical critique of Portland's form of government is beyond the scope of this study. This research committee should focus on the form of government as it currently stands with regards to representation of Portland citizens, and how it may be changed, altered and/or improved in the future.

## Current Issues and Challenges

As has been mentioned, Portland has the last remaining Commission form of government among large cities in the United States. This may pose a challenge for the research committee in that the lack of similar existing systems elsewhere in the country gives few examples to point to for suggested fine-tuning for Portland's system. Examples exist of large-scale overhauls for similarly-sized systems (see Background section), but more modest reform examples may be difficult to find.

Another potential challenge for the research committee could be lack of political will to address this issue. Considering that Portland's system is fairly unique among large cities suggests there is political will to keep it that way. Furthermore, the current system provides for all seats being elected at-large, and with our current style of government, the commissioners have legislative powers. To have political will on this issue, we would have to convince the current seat holders to give them up. This would be a difficult sell.

## Outline of Report

1. Executive Summary
2. Scope of the Study
3. Questions to be Addressed
4. Background Information
5. Discussion
6. Conclusions
7. Recommendations

## Timeframe

The study is to be completed within 10 months of launch, but in any event, not later than October 31, 2017. The first six months will be devoted to accumulating and digesting information, interviewing witnesses, formulating tentative conclusions, and preliminary drafting of the report. The remaining period will be dedicated to discussion and finalizing the report.

## Chronological Work Plan

Dec 16	Convene first meeting of research committee.
Weeks Dec. 19 & 26	Holidays
Jan. 5	Board of Governors final approval of charge
Jan. 9 – May 7	Conduct interviews and review relevant documents.  Discuss conclusions and recommendations. Write initial draft of report. (This can be a partial report that shows good progress.)
May 8	Send initial draft to Research and Policy Director
May 17	Distribute first draft to Research and Advocacy & Awareness boards
May 24	Advocacy & Awareness Board first review of report.
May 25	Research Board first review of report.
May 26 – Sept. 24	Conduct additional interviews and research. Complete report. (Provide status updates and drafts to RAD and RB as requested.)
Sept. 25	Send final report to Research and Policy Director
Oct. 5	Send final report to Research Board
Oct. 12	Research Board Final Review
Oct. 26	Final Draft Due to BOG
Nov. 2	Board of Governors review
Nov. 6	Publication
Nov. 10	Friday Forum and vote on report

## Potential Key Resources

All resources and more, such as past City Club studies done on this subject, can be found on the shared Google Drive folder.

### [Portland Government Background](#)

Morgan, Doug, Masami Nishishiba, and Dan Vizzini. "" Keep Portland Weird," Retaining the Commission Form of Government." *More Than Mayor Or Manager: Campaigns to Change Form of Government in America's Large Cities* (2010): 279.

Morris, De, Amalia Alarcon, and Paul Leistner. "From neighborhood association system to participatory democracy: Broadening and deepening public involvement in Portland, Oregon." *National Civic Review* 98.2 (2009): 47-55.

#### Local Government Definitions

Handbook of Texas Online, Bradley R. Rice, "Commission Form of City Government," accessed November 16, 2016, <http://www.tshaonline.org/handbook/online/articles/moc01>.

"Alternative Voting Systems as Remedies for Unlawful At-Large Systems." *The Yale Law Journal*, vol. 92, no. 1, 1982, pp. 144–160. [www.jstor.org/stable/796065](http://www.jstor.org/stable/796065).

"Forms of Municipal Government." *NLC.org*. National League of Cities, n.d. Web. 16 Nov. 2016.

#### Spending

Baqir, Reza. "Districting and Government Overspending." *Journal of Political Economy*, vol. 110, no. 6, 2002, pp. 1318–1354. [www.jstor.org/stable/10.1086/342804](http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1086/342804).

Lindgren, Eric A. "Comparing San Francisco's at-Large and District Supervisor Elections' Average Spending and Participation Rates." *California Politics & Policy* 11.1 (2007): 38,46,65. *ProQuest*. Web. 30 Nov. 2016.

#### Relationships and Policy

Bebout, John E. "Management for Large Cities." *Public Administration Review*, vol. 15, no. 3, 1955, pp. 188–195. [www.jstor.org/stable/973016](http://www.jstor.org/stable/973016).

Pelissero, John P., and Timothy B. Krebs. "City Council Legislative Committees and Policy-Making in Large United States Cities." *American Journal of Political Science*, vol. 41, no. 2, 1997, pp. 499–518. [www.jstor.org/stable/2111774](http://www.jstor.org/stable/2111774).

## Representation

Adams, Greg D. "Legislative Effects of Single-Member Vs. Multi-Member Districts." *American Journal of Political Science*, vol. 40, no. 1, 1996, pp. 129–144. [www.jstor.org/stable/2111697](http://www.jstor.org/stable/2111697).

Miller, Nicholas R. "Voting Power with District Plus At-Large Representation." *Annual Meeting of the Public Choice Society, San Antonio, Texas*. 2008.

Tausanovitch, Chris, and Christopher Warshaw. "Representation in Municipal Government." *The American Political Science Review* 108.3 (2014): 605-41. *ProQuest*. Web. 30 Nov. 2016.

## Potential Key Witnesses

Name	Job Title	Email	Phone #	Notes
Ted Wheeler	Portland City Mayor			
Fred Miller	Former Chief Administrative Officer for the City Office of Management and Finance			
Andrew Scott	City Budget Director			
Richard Clacus	Professor, Political Science, PSU	<a href="mailto:clucasr@pdx.edu">clucasr@pdx.edu</a>	503.725.3258	Research focus on Oregon Politics
Christopher Shortell	Professor, Political Science, PSU	<a href="mailto:shortell@pdx.edu">shortell@pdx.edu</a>	503-725-5139	Research focus on election law and politics, will be more helpful about the legal challenges

Commented [SN1]: Too many PSU Professors. Which to cut?

Robert Ball		Rballcos@robertball.com	(503) 223-2255	Chief Petitioner of 2002 good government petition/ballot measure
John Russell			503-228- 2500	committee to keep Portland Portland
Bud Clark	Former Mayor		503-228- 7010	committee to keep Portland Portland
Julia Meier	Executive Director, Coalition of Communities of Color	Julia@coalitioncommunitiescolor.org	(503) 200-5722	CCC has produced seven research reports examining local communities of color with the goal of eliminating racial and ethnic inequities
Frank McNeil	Talk radio host, political activist	frank@wmay.com		Plaintiff in McNeil V Springfield, that changed the local government system in Springfield to a more representative system
Jenice C Mitchell Ford	Senior Counsel, Clarkhill PLC	jmitchellford@clarkhill.com	313.965.8575	Chair of the Detroit Charter Revision Committee that changed to a ward-style structure

Robin Bellanca	Lawyer		(503) 294-9885	Focuses on Municipal and Environmental law in Portland
Masami Nishishiba	Associate Director, Center for Public Service Associate Professor of Public Administration	nishism@pdx.edu	503.725.5151	Wrote "Keep Portland Weird," Retaining the Commission Form of Government

**REPORT APPROVED BY:**

City Club Research Board TBA

City Club Board of Governors, TBA

Draft