

TO: San Diego City Council Members
FROM: League of Women Voters of San Diego
DATE: January 14, 2008
RE: ITEM-601 of Special Council Meeting: Consideration of the
Recommendations of the Charter Review Committee

We have 3 preliminary observations to bring to your attention:

First: Given our support for fair access to and equal treatment by city government, the San Diego LWV requests that you refrain from taking any action at tonight's special council meeting that would unfairly compromise other charter change proposals that have been properly submitted but haven't yet been heard and discussed by the full City Council. It would be premature to give direction to the City Attorney to draft ballot language for any item up for discussion at this meeting.

Second: Claims are being made that tonight's charter change proposals are necessary for getting the city back into the bond market. It should be obvious that what the SEC wants from the city has little to do with the organizational structure of San Diego government but has everything to do with the reliability of our checks and balances, the integrity of our financial reporting, and the responsible use of existing power by city officials.

And third: The memorandum from Councilmembers Peters, Faulconer, and Madaffer that was distributed to the City Council this past Friday suggests that these councilmembers have made up their minds before hearing from the public at tonight's meeting. It is a very discouraging and unfortunate message.

As you know, over the last few years the LWV has actively worked to improve charter change proposals, from Prop F -- the strong mayor initiative, to Prop C -- the managed competition initiative, to the recent charter review process. We've got a single goal in mind: to foster an open, efficient, trustworthy, responsive, and solvent city government in San Diego. We would like to believe this is also the overriding goal of the City Council and indeed the Mayor.

But it doesn't appear to be the goal of at least five of the recommendations being pushed forward by the chairman and other appointees of last year's heavily-criticized Charter Review Committee. If good government were really the objective, the following proposals would not be under consideration:

- 1) to dismantle the existing public contract for a 5-year trial period of the strong mayor system;
- 2) to immediately change the voting requirement for council override of the mayor's veto from a simple majority to what amounts to a 75% majority;
- 3) to arbitrarily and without benefit of public input increase the number of council districts from 8 to 11;

4) to replace the current Audit Committee, now made up of accountable legislators, with a tortuous system that gives crucial authority to private, non-elected individuals and that drastically reduces public scrutiny and oversight; and

5) to create a peculiar model for mayor-appointed City Auditor that, frankly, makes a mockery of the concepts of independence, public accountability, and reform.

When the voters voted for a 5-year trial period of the strong mayor system, we expected to get what we voted for. We hope the City Council will refrain from placing premature changes to Prop F on the June ballot involving the trial period, veto override, and number of council districts.

Regarding the crucial question of financial auditing, consider this: the City Council's fledgling Audit Committee has shown itself capable of stepping up to the plate and assuming the degree of authority, openness, and responsibility that could readily satisfy SEC standards as well as the city's needs.

And yet we're being presented with a frankenstein proposal by the mayor's committee that would throw out a working system and replace it with an opaque auditing structure that will only perpetuate the failing modus operandi that has characterized San Diego politics for far too long.

The charter changes that should be advanced to the ballot by the City Council are the ones that respect the public and are designed to protect the public. These five proposals do not qualify.

Our city has a crying need for more, not fewer, independent voices. Now more than ever, San Diego needs full exposure to a public give and take that can only happen with a strong City Council, a strong Mayor, an independent City Attorney, and an independent City Auditor – each of them directly accountable to the public.

Norma Damashek, President