

To: Rules Committee
From: League of Women Voters San Diego
Date: April 14, 2004
Re: Item-1 Charter Reform (Strong Mayor)

Honorable Mayor and City Councilmembers:

It's hard to know how to address the topic of this morning's meeting. We can start by saying that handing the public a pre-written proposal to install a strong mayor form of government is an unfortunate re-run of a similar attempt made four years ago. Then, it was an ill-advised act. Today it is the same.

We're not here to comment about the merits of a strong mayor system but about the fact that government is supposed to be of, for, and by the people. In this case, the people of this city have been treated as if we were invisible.

It comes as no surprise that the small group of private individuals who have spent time these past years putting together this charter document has asked you to promote their pet vision. But what alarms and disappoints us is that you have acquiesced.

Barely four years ago, when this group of individuals pressed the City Council to put their version of "strong mayor" on the ballot, the League of Women Voters responded this way: "Any consideration of a major restructuring of our city's form of government is of such great public importance that it warrants the formal participation – *from start to finish* – of a widely-representative range of civic stakeholders. This means an elected Charter Review Commission reflecting the entire spectrum of our population."

Four years later and here we are again. The difference is that, this time, the city is mired in major fiscal calamities. Will these problems be solved if we switch to a strong mayor system? It's highly doubtful. .

Nevertheless, there are two things we have no doubt about:

First – A high-handed, top-down, private process is not the way to go about revising our charter. If it becomes clear that changing our system of government is a high *public* priority, then the city council should feel obligated to set the wheels in motion for an elected charter review commission.

We can learn something from our neighbor to the north. Not long ago, the Los Angeles City Council decided it was time to revise their charter to give the mayor more power, and they appointed a charter reform commission to do the job. But voters stepped in and insisted on a publicly-elected charter commission to ensure that communities would have equal status with business interests in matters of city governance. In other words, the San Diego model of a self-selected private group of special interests does not qualify as a valid or acceptable charter reform commission.

The second thing we can be certain about is this -- At this moment in time, even without a charter change, the mayor and city councilmembers have sufficient political power to enact a series of governmental reforms badly needed in our city.

For example, one such reform involves closed session hearings and has already been initiated. It still needs to be finalized.

Another long-overdue reform involves restructuring the way the city budget is organized so that all city councilmembers, as well as the public, can analyze and influence budget decisions with insight and accuracy. Structurally-generated ignorance perpetuates non-accountability. The city can easily hire a competent team of experts to restructure and reform our budgetary system. We might also point out the immediate need to hire a competent city auditor to fill the unexpected vacuum that now exists in that office.

And alongside budget restructuring, we should also insist on reformed management and control of the TOT budget. The use and abuse of TOTs need prompt attention and public transparency. We are also awaiting a straightforward ballot proposal to increase the TOT rate.

Furthermore, before engaging in talk about a strong mayor, we need to reform the way our Ethics Commissioners are chosen. Selection by politicians compromises true independence and effectiveness and undermines public confidence and trust.

And we don't need a strong mayor to bring reform to the city's Planning Department which, a decade ago, was an independent agency. You can readily increase your influence on the city's future by taking planning out from under the city manager's thumb.

We believe it's also time to reform our community planning groups to restore and strengthen their function as democratic forums for neighborhood and local concerns. This would be a necessary counterweight to any proposal for a stronger mayor.

Our list goes on with reforms that can be accomplished now. Which leaves us with a simple question: What is on your list that requires a change in the city's system of government?

In closing, I will repeat what the LWV recommended four years ago: "Today's attempt to accommodate a private group of individuals who have taken it upon themselves to restructure our city government should be tabled. If you would like to pursue this issue, we urge you to choose a more democratic alternative."