

Damashek: Let the Strong-Mayor Experiment Die

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Not everyone gets excited over the ins and outs of city government. But there's a measure on the June ballot that could make your hair stand on end. It's called Proposition D, also known as the strong-mayor initiative. It should be setting off alarm bells in your neighborhood and in every community in San Diego.



^[1]In a nutshell: San Diego has been experimenting with a “strong-mayor” form of government for the past five years. The trial period is drawing to a close and it's time for voters to decide whether to make the strong-mayor system permanent or whether to let it die a natural death. We get to do that on June 8 with Proposition D.

Proposition D calls for fundamental changes to the San Diego City Charter that would permanently expand the size of city government and change the way our city is run. But here's the kicker: Proposition D is not a single measure — it's a package deal containing a sly provision to create bigger government in San Diego by forcing us to add an expensive, unnecessary, and undefined new council district, with taxpayers footing the bill.

Government expansion is a fiscally irresponsible demand at a time when San Diego is in the worst financial crisis in our city's history.

The strong-mayor office already costs twice as much to run. There's no leadership on how to pay for the city's overwhelming budget, infrastructure, and pension deficits. They're making huge cuts to police and fire protection, libraries and parks, street repairs and the city's workforce. After five years under a Strong-Mayor system they still haven't come up with a plan to save our city from financial ruin. It's no surprise that a local news reporter calls San Diego a dissolving city.

That's not the only kicker in the Proposition D package. Buried in 11 pages of City Charter deletions and additions are permanent changes to increase the mayor's control over City Council decisions. Right now it takes a majority vote for the City Council to deal with budget priorities and neighborhood issues. We, as constituents, have direct access at public hearings to the City Council, City Attorney, and even the City Auditor and can air our opinions and concerns before they make decisions.

Proposition D would shift control to the strong-mayor. The problem is, you will never see the strong-mayor participate in open public hearings. Under Proposition D this top official never has to see, hear, or respond to your constituent concerns. At a time when neighborhoods and communities need stronger representation at City Hall, Proposition D's goal of weakening our council's ability to get things done represents a destructive step backwards.

It comes down to this: Proposition D does not give voters a choice. The Proposition D package promotes stronger mayor and bigger government and shutting the door on community priorities.

It's all or nothing. For this reason and many more, Proposition D is worth a much closer look before you cast your vote on June 8.

The League of Women Voters has taken a very close look. We have documented a marked deterioration throughout the strong-mayor trial period of political accountability, responsiveness to constituent concerns, efficient management of daily city business, checks and balances, citizen access, and government openness.

It's bad enough that Proposition D forces us to expand the size and cost of city government at a time we can least afford it. But after five years of monitoring the strong-mayor system and closely observing what has happened in our city during this strong-mayor experiment, the League has concluded that the strong-mayor system has been a failure in San Diego. The LWV recommends a "no" vote on Proposition D.

More opinions on the strong-mayor government: [Democrats need to support the strong-mayor initiative](#)^[2] | [Strong-mayor endorsement](#)^[3] | [Strong-mayor is undemocratic, expensive](#)^[4]

If you'd like to read an eye-opening report on the strong-mayor experiment, go to the League [website](#)^[5]. You'll find background information, a candid account of what went wrong, and a startling list of the financial backers of Proposition D.

We were warned in advance about strong-mayor. Almost six years ago, our not-yet-Mayor Jerry Sanders urged voters to say "no" to the strong-mayor experiment. He said that voters should say "no" to the strong-mayor system in order to protect our neighborhoods from special interest control, keep government accountable to the people, and stop backroom deals.

Fast forward five years. Sanders is now making paid political phone calls asking voters to support strong-mayor. We are bombarded by TV blasts, campaign signs on every street corner, glossy mailers — whatever money can buy — to promote Proposition D.

Related Links: [More by Colleen](#)^[6] | [Five years later, concerns remain on the strong-mayor government](#)^[7] | [Frye's suit challenges language on strong-mayor proposition](#)^[8] | [Strong-mayor antes up](#)^[9]

A look at who writes the checks for the Proposition D campaign tells it all. The supporters of Proposition D are a veritable who's who of San Diego real estate investors, hotel and commercial developers, companies with (or expecting) city contracts, lobbyists, investment bankers, law firms, contractor and construction firms, bankers, and the powerful downtown establishment. These are the real beneficiaries of a Strong-Mayor system. Accountability? Yes, but accountability to whom?

Your "no" vote on Proposition D is the way to restore true accountability in San Diego by bringing the mayor back as the leader of the City Council, conducting business in direct contact with the public.

Your “no” vote will prevent further bloating of city government, save taxpayers millions, and turn San Diego’s priorities back to our communities, not to downtown developers or publicly-subsidized trophy projects.

Your “no” vote will ensure that our city is run by a professionally trained City Manager and not by ill-equipped political appointees.

Your “no” vote will put us back on the path of good governance for all San Diego citizens, not government by-and-for the financial backers of Prop D.

Here’s our bottom line: San Diego can’t afford Proposition D — not financially, not politically, and not if we value the standards of good government espoused by the LWV.

Norma Damashek is the co-president of San Diego League of Women Voters.

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