

## Poughkeepsie residents divided on professional staff for council

POUGHKEEPSIE – Poughkeepsie Common Council members are weighing over an hour of divergent opinion from residents on a separation of powers issue. A public hearing on a local law that would allow the council to retain its own professional staff was held earlier this week.

Among the presenters was Gerald Benjamin, a SUNY New Paltz professor who was a consultant to the charter commission.

“I think that if you look at the design of the government that you chose and you look at the implications of that design for how policies are made, it cries out for legislative ... some degree of independent legislative staffing,” Benjamin said.

There were diverse opinions from city officials.

City Administrator Marc Nelson is not sold on the idea. He cited the preamble of the new city charter which took effect this year.

“This revised charter clarifies that the city chamberlain and the corporation counsel serve the common council as well as the mayor, thus ensuring that the legislative branch has sufficient clerical and legal support in the exercise of its power and authority,” Nelson said.

Councilwoman-at-Large Ann Finney, whose position was created by the new charter, supports the proposal.

“More information we feel, we all feel, provides a better decision in the end and the questions that the common council was facing are becoming more challenging.” Finney said it would also provide a better handle on tracking cost.

Among the public speakers, former councilman Lee Klein, who said instances when outside counsel is needed are rare.

“They can be brought up during the course of council meetings,” Klein said. “They can be brought up during inquiries made by council members with city staff between council meetings and I think this isn’t so much about having available people to assist or consult or advise; I think it’s about control.”

Klein urged defeat of the proposal.

Among citizens supporting the proposal was Murray Solomon.

“It’s going to provide a separation of executive and legislative powers and functions which are going to act as a checks and balances.” Solomon said.

The council took no action, but later in the three-hour meeting, council members

Sarah Brennan and Sarah Salem said they support the local law.

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