

Commission to propose 'significant' city government changes



Nina Schutzman, Poughkeepsie Journal 4:24 p.m. EDT July 8, 2016



(Photo: Patrick Oehler/Poughkeepsie Journal)

A commission that just spent a year reviewing the City of Poughkeepsie's structure of government will propose "significant" changes to the current system, according to a news release.

The City of Poughkeepsie Charter Review Commission will announce its preliminary proposed changes and gather community feedback at a public hearing Monday.

"The structural changes we are proposing will make city government more accountable to the voters," Ron McGaw, chairman of the charter review commission, said via statement.

It's unclear what the proposed changes will be — no material was released with the commission's statement and McGaw could not be reached for comment by the time of publication. The commission did say it has "focused its work on the mayor and city council, the two major governing institutions."

Officials have discussed a number of issues related to the current governmental structure and [the commission \(http://file:///C:/Users/nschutzman/Downloads/Empowering%20the%20City%20Council%20\(1\).pdf\)](http://file:///C:/Users/nschutzman/Downloads/Empowering%20the%20City%20Council%20(1).pdf) has published reports [\(http://file:///C:/Users/nschutzman/Downloads/Empowering%20the%20Mayor.pdf\)](http://file:///C:/Users/nschutzman/Downloads/Empowering%20the%20Mayor.pdf) that cover a variety [\(http://file:///C:/Users/nschutzman/Downloads/Structural_Questions.pdf\)](http://file:///C:/Users/nschutzman/Downloads/Structural_Questions.pdf) of topics, including the existing power structure and term limits.

Any changes [would require revising the city charter \(/story/news/local/2014/06/21/city-mayor-salary-boost/11224653/\)](/story/news/local/2014/06/21/city-mayor-salary-boost/11224653/), which would be subject to a referendum, according to Journal archives.

When contacted Friday, neither city Mayor Rob Rolison nor Council Chairman Christopher Petsas knew what changes the commission will propose. But during its review, the commission interviewed both of them, along with other officials and administrators.

The charter has not been changed since 1994, when the city "moved from a weak mayor system with a city manager to the current hybrid system" of government, with both a mayor and a city administrator, the commission said.

Under the current charter, residents elect the mayor and the mayor appoints a full-time administrator, along with city judges and some other spots.

The mayoral seat is considered part-time because of the \$25,000 a year salary, but according to a report from the commission, the current charter "is silent on the matter." Right now, the charter "[neither prohibits the mayor from outside \(http://file:///C:/Users/nschutzman/Downloads/Empowering%20the%20Mayor.pdf\)](http://file:///C:/Users/nschutzman/Downloads/Empowering%20the%20Mayor.pdf) employment, nor does it expressly state that the position is a full or part-time position."

In the past, officials have discussed the possibilities of increasing the mayor's salary and requiring him or her to work full-time hours, while eliminating the city administrator position.

Rolison, who took office in January, [appointed longtime police Chief Ron Knapp \(/story/news/local/central-dutchess/2015/12/14/rolison-looks-forward-jan-1/77294138/\)](/story/news/local/central-dutchess/2015/12/14/rolison-looks-forward-jan-1/77294138/) as acting city administrator to replace Milo Bunyi. The administrator [appoints department heads \(http://file:///C:/Users/nschutzman/Downloads/Structural_Questions.pdf\)](http://file:///C:/Users/nschutzman/Downloads/Structural_Questions.pdf) and supervises department structure, among other things.

"I believe the city has to have an administrator," Rolison said. "I've been comfortable with how (the current system) is working so far, we're working well together. That doesn't mean there aren't other ways."

Whether the mayoral seat is full or part time "would not be an issue for me personally," Rolison added. "I'm already working full-time. But I do believe the mayor is a full-time position and should be structured as such."

Petsas said he supports a "stronger mayor form of government" and officially making the mayoral position full-time.

With the city's current troubled finances, [debt and cash flow issues among them \(/story/news/local/southern-dutchess/2016/06/21/state-offer-recommendations-restore-city-poughkeepsie-finances/86175754/\)](/story/news/local/southern-dutchess/2016/06/21/state-offer-recommendations-restore-city-poughkeepsie-finances/86175754/), "having a city administrator is probably good for us at this point," Petsas said. But eventually, he would like to have "a highly qualified mayor running and leading our city" without an administrator.

Eight city council members each represent one ward or district with a salary of \$9,000 a year. Historically, each councilmember has represented an average of 2,745 residents, according to a commission report.

Under the current charter, a mayor is limited to serving two consecutive four-year terms and councilmembers can serve four two-year terms — eight years total for both.

Changing a council term to four years "would make sense" to Petsas, he said. It would allow officials to "devote more time to the job, rather than (worry about) campaigning."

But the biggest charter change Petsas would like to see relates to mayoral appointments.

"City judges should be elected by residents and not appointed (by the mayor) through a political process," Petsas said.

Former Mayor [John Tkazyik](#) announced the creation of the advisory commission, which was charged with reviewing and recommending changes to the city's current form of government, in 2014. It has been meeting on a regular basis since June 2015 and hired "the Benjamin Center for Public Policy Initiatives at [SUNY New Paltz](#) to facilitate their work" with a grant from the Dyson Foundation.

The public hearing is set for Monday at 5:30 p.m. in the Common Council chambers at city hall.

Nina Schutzman: nschutzman@poughkeepsiejournal.com, 845-451-4518, Twitter: [@pojonschutzman](#)

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