



Deborah Kafoury Multnomah County Chair

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July 5, 2016

Dear Chair Leonard and Members of the Charter Review Committee,

Thank you for providing me with an opportunity to testify before the Charter Review Committee last week. As I said then, the time you have spent examining our county charter shows your dedication to public service and your commitment to improving the way Multnomah County serves the people.

However, I wanted to follow up in writing and urge you to reconsider changing Multnomah County's form of government to one led by an unelected county manager.

The proposal you are considering, if approved, would be an enormous change to county government and I have concerns about concentrating power, particularly the development of the budget, into the hands of an unelected bureaucrat.

First, and most importantly, this proposal would put a new barrier between citizens and their government.

The budget is the most important policy tool that the commissioners have. The executive budget, while proposed by the chair under our current form of government, always includes ideas and priorities that commissioners have proposed or are working on directly with the chair.

That's how it worked when I was a commissioner, and that's how it works now. Putting a barrier between the commission and the preparation of the executive budget would mean that the voice of voters wouldn't be included until very late in the budget process.

In addition, this proposal would limit the ability for commissioners to advocate for their constituents with departments, putting new barriers in place and making it harder for commission offices to respond in a timely way to issues in their districts.

Secondly, I think it is vital to recognize that this is not a small or technical change. This proposal is a foundational change to the way the county operates. It would take months to understand where the county would need to change its business practices in order to accommodate a new chain of management. It would also take months to install that leadership change, requiring untold hours of staff time in order to rewrite codes, ordinances, and administrative rules, and be very costly.

And the disruption would undermine the effectiveness of Multnomah County at a critical moment when we are making historic investments in infrastructure, including the expansion of shelter and temporary housing for the homeless, Willamette River bridge replacement, the downtown courthouse and the health department headquarters.

In recent years the county has made a significant shift in the way we do business, putting in place a set of core values and pushing our departments to operate in a more culturally responsive way. The most visible recent change is in the transition of our SUN School system where we are developing deeper partnerships with culturally specific providers to give our kids the support they need -- regardless of their background.

The board of commissioners and I are committed to advancing this work, but the disruption of a new layer of bureaucracy would make it harder for the board to push for change.

The charter forms the backbone of county government, and over the course of many years it has been strengthened through voter-approved reforms that have maximized our ability to work with the Portland, Gresham and other east county cities.

While the strong county manager form of government is common in suburban and rural communities with part-time political leadership and small budgets, Multnomah County is a large urban county -- the only one in Oregon with a city the size of Portland.

And while political leadership has changed over the last 20 years at the county, a strong and professional leadership staff has remained in place throughout that political turnover. That is a testament to the commitment our county professional staff has to our mission, but also to the stability that our form of government provides.

Multnomah County is leading efforts to improve homeless services, our criminal justice system and our health care system and investing millions in important infrastructure projects. A sudden disruption of this scale would put that work at risk.

I appreciate your dedication to this work and your willingness to listen to my concerns.

Sincerely,



Deborah Kafoury
Multnomah County Chair