

Dear Multnomah County Charter Review Committee,

I served on the 2015/16 Multnomah County Charter Review Committee. Based on some of the discussion at the initial meeting of your Subcommittee #1, I am concerned that there may be some misconceptions about the current county management model. So I wanted to share some information and some history.

Multnomah County has a Chief Operating Officer (COO) who manages county operations and who reports to the Chair, instead of a traditional County Manager. This is considered a hybrid county manager model that is established through ordinances and other tools. The establishment of the role through these tools, instead of the Charter, makes the COO position more vulnerable but also more flexible to respond to changing needs because it can be changed by a majority of the County Board without waiting for a Charter Review and voter approval.

The current County COO, Serena Cruz, was the first Latina elected to the Multnomah County Board of Commissioners. The announcement of her appointment is here: [Chair Deborah Kafoury selects Serena Cruz as Chief Operating Officer | Multnomah County \(multco.us\)](#)

Her predecessor as COO was Marissa Madrigal, the first Latina to hold the job. She is now the COO at the Metro regional government, which I believe is generally seen as the top government COO job in the region. The announcement of her appointment is here: [Board appoints new chief operating officer, health department director | Multnomah County \(multco.us\)](#)

During our committee's deliberations, two (now former) County Commissioners proposed a County Manager charter amendment that would have both codified a County Manager position and shifted the responsibility for managing county operations away from the sole responsibility of the Chair to a shared responsibility of the Board. These changes were opposed, however, by Chair Kafoury (who was Chair at the time) and the other two Commissioners. The county Auditor and the District Attorney at the time also supported the current model.

While a majority of our committee supported the charter amendment proposal initially, after we learned more we decided not to send it to voters.

Here are some of the draft Findings that our Committee created for a proposed County Manager amendment to the charter while it was under consideration:

- d. Multnomah County has effectively created a hybrid county manager model through the adoption of ordinances and employee classification and compensation plans that establish the role of chief operating officer.
- e. The current hybrid structure lacks some of the elements of an appointed county manager found in other counties.

- f. The current hybrid structure could be reversed by the actions of a future board.
- g. The Chief Operating Officer currently performs two roles, one as the Director of the Department of County Management and another as a 'Department Director Principal' with the working title of 'Chief Operating Officer.'
- h. The current structure creates a broad portfolio of responsibilities for the Chief Operating Officer which are not specified in the Charter.
- i. Two current commissioners support a Charter amendment to establish a county manager who would be appointed and managed by the Board.
- j. The current chair and two commissioners oppose amending the Charter amendment to establish a county manager appointed and managed by the Board. The county Auditor and District Attorney also support the current model.

One of our committee's principles was that we shouldn't "fix" things that aren't broken, because you can easily and accidentally create unexpected problems. There are flaws in every governance model. Changes to reporting structures ripple through organizations and distract leaders and employees as they figure out how a new system works and jockey for power and influence.

Three of our current Commissioners have announced that they plan to run for County Chair. Chair Kafoury's term ends at the end of this year and term limits prevent her from running for re-election. Even if one of the current Commissioners is elected Chair, next year will be a time of tremendous change for the county Board. Adding significant changes to the COO's role at the same time could be extremely disruptive to county operations.

If you want to consider charter amendments that would formalize the County COO position by adding it to the Charter, or to change it to a more traditional County Manager position, I strongly urge you to ask Chair Kafoury, the current COO Serena Cruz, and any previous COOs who are available to speak with you ASAP. Our committee did not hear from Chair Kafoury or then-COO Madrigal until late in our process, and that was a mistake. Make sure you clearly understand the current hybrid system and the effects (positive and negative) of any proposed changes, including secondary effects that are less obvious such as disruption of major county projects.

I have many years of experience as a citizen advocate on Multnomah County and Metro committees, meeting with County Commissioners and Chairs, and testified at many Planning Commission and Board of Commissioners hearings not only in Multnomah County but also in Washington County, at Metro and City of Portland. Multnomah County, top to bottom, is by far the most responsive to citizens (which is not to say that it is perfect). I believe that this responsiveness is rooted in our unique management model.

There may be some minor Charter changes to codify the COO role that would be helpful (for example to require the COO appointment to be confirmed by the Board), but please be cautious and carefully research any changes you consider.

Thank you for your service, and best wishes on your journey.

Carol Chesarek