

CITIZENS LEAGUE
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Minneapolis, MN 55402

Approved: Board of Directors
October 9, 1974

CITIZENS LEAGUE URGES 'YES' VOTE ON MINNEAPOLIS
GOVERNMENTAL REORGANIZATION NOV. 5

We urge the voters of Minneapolis to approve the changes in city government structure proposed by the Charter Commission, which will be on the general election ballot Nov. 5.

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These are limited changes. By contrast with other efforts at charter revision -- in 1936, in 1948, in 1960 and in 1963 . . . all of which would have shifted control of city operations away from the City Council . . . this set of amendments proposed by the Commission accepts the basic framework of Minneapolis government, in which the city is administered by committees of aldermen.

The changes now proposed are aimed solely at adding to this strong Council system some greater element of policy leadership, placed in the hands of the one policy official who is elected by all the people of the city. The power would remain with the City Council. But the mayor would be enabled--and required--to make proposals . . . particularly in the two key areas of budgeting and of city planning and development.

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These changes are consistent with the central conclusions of Citizens League studies, over the years, about effective governmental organization in the City of Minneapolis.

In February 1963, in its statement to the Charter Commission, the League said: "In our opinion the single greatest weakness in the Minneapolis governmental structure is its failure to provide sufficient city-wide leadership to meet effectively the increasingly complex problems facing our community."

In January 1964, following voter rejection of a full reorganization of city structure, the League said to the Commission that "We are now confronted by the fact that the voters have rejected by substantial majorities proposed charter amendments designed to (place administrative functions under an executive elected city-wide) . . . It is probable that successful endeavors to improve the structure of city government, at least in the immediate future, must of necessity be limited to refinements within the existing system . . . These could bring improvements. We regard modest changes as clearly superior to no progress at all."

Changes are needed: Everything is not 'working well'

It is no criticism either of the governmental system or of the people in it to suggest that some changes in its organization may be needed, to reflect the new problems facing the city and the changes in the governmental environment around it.

The Charter Commission has correctly, in our view, identified two key weaknesses, which are cause for real concern as we look into the late 1970s and beyond.

* The first is the weakness in budgeting and financial planning. Minneapolis, along with other major central cities, is facing increasingly serious fiscal problems. Essential programs are in danger, every year. And every year, revenues are found for just one more year. Long-term revenue sources are uncertain. And, on the expenditure side, citizen input into budget priorities is a continuing source of dissatisfaction.

* The second is the weakness in physical planning and development procedures. Minneapolis must rehabilitate and replace its facilities, public and private. Far too much of the responsibility for this has been left, however, to officials not responsive or accountable to the people of the city as a whole. To the extent the aldermen take the lead, an impression is created that the City Council is both 'proposer' and 'disposer', and that the system is not truly 'open'. To the extent the Coordinator takes the lead, an impression is created that the city is dominated by administrative, rather than by elected, officials. Both these reactions can, we believe, be seen in the voter reaction expressed in 1973.

These weaknesses threaten the stability and the effectiveness of Minneapolis city government. A fundamental check-and-balance--which the public seeks, for confidence--is missing.

The proposed amendments would build a 'partnership' between Mayor and Council

The Charter Commission proposes essentially to establish a check-and-balance by giving to the mayor both the duty and the ability to present:

* An annual budget, both operating and capital. A new emphasis would have to be placed on revenue sources, as well as on expenditures. An item veto would be provided, to give his proposals greater weight with the City Council (which would continue to have the power to override). A budget director and a small staff would be provided, to make the mayor's budget role meaningful.

* An annual report on the planning and development of the city. The mayor would be required to come to grips with the major problems of the city. The citizen members of the Planning Commission would serve terms coterminous with his. The planning director would become, in effect, the mayor's staff. The mayor's veto would be extended over the council's 'committee reports', which frequently deal with substantial development issues, and the Planning Commission's authority to review proposed projects would be expanded. The City Council would retain, however, its present authority to override both the veto and the planning review.

We believe this offers substantial promise of ending the discord which has characterized mayor/council relationships in recent years.

Final power remains with the City Council. This may not always please mayors. But this is the way it should be.

At the same time, mayors are given a real authority to make proposals--which is not an insignificant power. This may not always please City Councils. But this is, also, the way it should be.

The people of the city will be the real beneficiaries. Debate over priorities, plans and policies is likely to become much more open, and balanced. Confidence in the system should be increased, by giving a larger voice to the mayor who--because he is elected, and citywide--is obliged to listen to everyone.

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The offices of Comptroller and Treasurer should be merged

The Citizens League statement to the Charter Commission in 1963 included a recommendation to "shorten the unduly long ballot by eliminating the elective positions of Treasurer and Comptroller."

The Charter Commission now proposes in effect a halfway step: to merge the two offices into one, which would continue to be elected.

While this does not go as far as we had earlier proposed, we find it consistent with the general direction of needed change, and we recommend its approval.

The concept of 'liquor patrol limits' should, at last, be eliminated

The Citizens League has, since the 1950s, urged elimination of the obsolete system for the location of on-and off-sale licenses, which involves a theoretical 'limit' around the center of the city within which licenses could be located, but with increasingly inequitable privileges for certain licenses to locate and to relocate outside these limits.

There should continue to be restrictions on where liquor licenses can locate, But these should relate to and be governed by the city's system of zoning and land use.

We supported such a change when it was proposed most recently, in 1969--and when it received a majority of votes in favor (though not the extraordinary majority required to become effective).

The Charter Commission is resubmitting, in 1974, the same amendment put to the voters in 1969. We again recommend and urge its approval.

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