

Article by Amy Senk
Let's talk about "Elect Our Mayor"

By AMY SENK

Do you want to have a direct vote to select the mayor of Newport Beach? Before you say "sure" because you saw it on Instagram, or because you have mad respect for the councilmember who has launched the Elect Our Mayor campaign, I am making a simple request.

Do your research. Listen and learn. Because like most things in life, this decision is more complicated than it might first seem. It may or may not be what this city needs, and a robust public debate could clear the air.

Personally, when I first heard about Councilmember Will O'Neill's campaign to put the mayor election choice directly to voters, I thought it sounded good. I saw support on social media posts but didn't give it further thought. It was Labor Day weekend and I was distracted.

Then my phone began to ring, and texts and emails stacked up – many from people deeply alarmed by O'Neill's plan and its potential ramifications. I set out to learn more and spent the past week meeting with people, talking to them and asking questions. I spoke to former mayors, current councilmembers, chambers of commerce representatives, residents connected with groups like Speak Up Newport, SPON and the Corona del Mar Residents Association. I read opinion pieces and letters to editors, documents and emails listing numerous concerns. I also heard positive feedback and I met with O'Neill to discuss all of it.

The Elect Our Mayor plan would allow voters to vote for a mayor directly rather than the current system where the seven council members select a new mayor among themselves each December. It would restructure the city's seven districts, creating six instead. It also would allow the directly elected mayor to set the agenda for City Council meetings, near exclusive control, some critics say. O'Neill has recruited volunteers to collect signatures to put this on a June ballot, and if it passes, he said the first direct mayoral election would take place in 2024. He may or may not run – he has not thought that far ahead, he told me.

Some people I spoke to told me that the effort smacked of authoritarianism: "Rather than relying on the traditional wisdom of collective decision making, everything would be so much better if we only had a strong man to tell the people what they should be thinking and make the trains run on time," this friend wrote to me in an email.

Others made detailed multi-bullet point documents listing concern after concern after concern. These are not things you would get from reading comments on an Instagram post. A lot of them are wonky, in-the-weeds points that reveal a deep understanding of how our charter system works, how it has worked historically, past mistakes and tricky situations and the endless ripple effects that could result from this new system.

Have we considered what it might mean to allow one person to retain power in Newport Beach, through City Council and later mayoral terms, for 16 years or more? Have we considered what it

would mean if we as citizens had a concern that we wanted placed on an agenda, but the future mayor disagreed and said no? Would we be able to, as non-politicians, be able to finagle half the council to help us? Would the city manager be able to help?

Currently, a citizen who runs for city council knows there is a chance he or she might someday get the opportunity to serve as mayor for a year. Will the new system dissuade some potentially amazing candidates from running, knowing that the gavel was off the table, that they would always be less equal on the dais?

Others said the proposal is a “solution looking for a problem” because our city is doing well, even coming out of the COVID crisis. O’Neill agreed that our current system isn’t broken, but he described his proposed system’s benefits, like having leadership continuity during difficult times.

We talked about why he launched his campaign over social media rather than with a robust public discussion at a City Council meeting, where many council observers and insiders would have expected such a proposed charter amendment to originate.

“This is trying to return power from the council to people,” he said. “Why not go directly to the people first?”

I have no problem with going to the people first – if it includes vigorous public debate, discussion and input. I don’t think comments on Facebook or Instagram are always reliable, nor do I think that letters from both sides really reach and educate the electorate.

Because we don’t get to do this at a City Council meeting, I call upon groups like Speak Up Newport and the CdMRA and Chambers of Commerce of Corona del Mar and Newport Beach to host panels. Not panels where Councilmember O’Neill describes his plans and ideas and takes a few questions, but a real, election forum-type panel with opposing sides getting equal time to present their concerns, along with O’Neill explaining his beliefs about why this plan could very well be the best thing for Newport Beach.

Some of these groups said they are working on it. I hope they follow through.