

Paul Watkins, Citizen of the Year

My friend of over forty (40) years passed away shortly after Christmas. I will call my friend “Al”. Al was elderly. Ill health for several years. Smart guy – one of the smartest I’ve known. Longtime Newport resident. We talked about all things Newport. Mostly by phone as Al’s health declined.

Several of our discussions involved the upcoming June 7 primary in which the direct election of the Newport Beach Mayor will be on the ballot.

At first, Al and I agreed that “Elect Our Mayor” had a nice ring – yes, democracy in action.

But as our discussions continued this fall and as we studied the issues, chinks in the armor of the catchphrase “Elect Our Mayor” began to appear.

Al asked:

- A desire to obtain/retain power? Power tends to corrupt and absolute power tends to corrupt absolutely?
- Why was the signature gathering effort terminated, i.e., a conventional democratic means of gauging electorate interest and publicly looking at the pluses and minuses?
- What problem are we trying to solve, i.e., if it ain’t broke, ...?
- It’s great for the Mayor’s “District,” but maybe not-so-great for the other Districts.
- Isn’t it possible that after serving eight (8) years as a councilmember, the successful mayor candidate may be able to add on another eight (8) years as mayor for a total of sixteen (16) years on the council?
- Have we in the past provided one person with the right in that person’s “sole discretion” to (i) set City Council agendas and (ii) change the order of business on the agendas?
- Will the other Council folks be able to continue to add value or will the consolidation of authority result in less effective leadership for our other Districts?
- Is a “strong mayor” model best for our City where it is possible that he/she may lack appropriate training, education, and experience in municipal administration and finance? Is it possible that this model may tend to result in ill-advised decisions on hiring/firing of key positions? Will we be able to attract/retain accomplished municipal executives under this model?
- Is it an improvement to have one person’s judgment in place of the collective wisdom of seven?

Perhaps with additional study/research and changes to the text of this measure, some of the ideas expressed may be worthwhile.

But as we turn the page to the chapter entitled “2022,” my late friend, Al, has raised a number of legitimate questions about the “Elect Our Mayor” campaign. I am inclined to agree with Al that the City Charter on this issue has served us well for nearly seventy (70) years. The changes as presently proposed are not needed. I urge a “NO” vote on June 7.

Paul K. Watkins
Newport Beach
