

Susan Skinner

City Councilman Will O'Neill has announced that he is collecting signatures for a voter initiative to make the Mayor of Newport Beach an elected position. However, this initiative does much more than just establish an elected mayor. It establishes an elected mayor with immense power and that is just wrong.

Hidden in the initiative is Section 404(b), which states "Except as provided in Section 405, the Mayor shall have the sole discretion to set City Council agendas and to change the order of business on the agenda."

Section 405 does allow adding items on the agenda if half of the remaining council members agree, but this is quite a high standard to meet and effectively excludes the rest of the council from readily bringing issues forward.

Instead, the initiative will give the mayor near total control of what may be brought in front of the council. If an unpopular issue is to be discussed and a crowd is expected for an agenda item at 8 p.m., the mayor can arbitrarily move the item to an earlier hour and bypass all that pesky input.

Now imagine if the mayor is beholden to special interests. If those special interests do or don't want something inconvenient to their purposes on the agenda, the mayor can make that happen. As an example, many of us feel that Team Newport's campaign consultant Dave Ellis exerts that power over his successful candidates. Remember the Museum House condo approved by the City Council over the objections of literally thousands of residents? The developer told me that Mr. Ellis was a consultant on the project because "that is how it is done."

If a majority of the City Council supported this initiative, they could vote to put it on the ballot, but this has not occurred. Mr. O'Neill's efforts to gather signatures appears to be a solitary quest unsupported by his fellow council members. Maybe they feel, as I do, that we should not give that much power to one person.

The residents of Newport Beach deserve to have their elected City Councilpersons have an equal say in the running of our city. Electing an abnormally powerful mayor is exactly the wrong thing to do and I sincerely hope that citizens think twice before signing this misguided initiative.

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