

**Walter Stahr, respected historian**

***Elected mayor is just not right for Newport Beach for so many reasons***

I am a resident of Newport Beach; my family moved here in 1972; and my parents were honored a few years back as “Citizens of the Year” in Newport Beach.

I am writing to urge you to vote NO on the proposal for direct election of the mayor.

The key argument for the proposed change is that the “people of Newport Beach should elect their mayor.” But it is not quite right to say that the people of Newport Beach do not select their mayor. The citizens elect seven members of the city council and the council members select (each year) one of their number to serve as mayor for a one-year term. Given the small size of the city council, and the four-year terms of the members, and the frequency of second terms, most people who are elected to city council serve as mayor for at least one year. The people thus select their mayor indirectly, by electing a city council whose duties include selecting one of their members to serve as mayor each year.

Many other important positions in our governments are filled in a similar indirect manner. The people do not elect the Speaker of the US House of Representatives; the members of the House select the Speaker every two years. The people do not elect the federal attorney general, or indeed any other member of the Executive Branch; they elect a president (through another indirect mechanism, the Electoral College) who appoints (with the advice and consent of the Senate) the key members of the Executive.

The current system effectively ensures that mayors have experience in our city government. If you look at the men and women who have been mayor since 2001, all but one of them served at least one year as mayor pro tem and another year as city council member before becoming mayor. The only exception was John Heffernan, who was elected as mayor midyear in 2005, after serving eighteen months on the city council, to fill the vacancy created by the mid-year resignation of Steven Bromberg.

Nothing prohibits the city council members from selecting, in December, a member who has just been elected in November, but they have not done so in more than twenty years, for good reason. There is a de facto requirement of at least two years of city council experience to become mayor of Newport Beach.

Under the proposed system, there is no guarantee that the person elected mayor will have any prior experience on the city council or indeed in our city government at all.

If you look at other cities in California, some of them have directly elected mayors (including Los Angeles and San Diego) but far more of them have city councils (like ours) that select a short-term mayor from among their number. The pattern is clear: cities with large populations almost always have a directly elected mayor, and cities with smaller populations almost always have mayors selected by the city council.

Newport Beach is not a large city; the population according to the 2020 census is only 85,239 people. In a ranking of California cities by population, Newport Beach is (just barely) among the hundred largest cities.

If you look at cities in Orange County with about the same population as Newport Beach, in other words 80-100,000 people, only one of them, Westminster, elects its mayor directly. Five cities in this population bracket, including Mission Viejo and Lake Forest, both with larger populations than Newport Beach, use the same system as Newport Beach, that is indirect election.

And there are even larger cities, including Fullerton and Huntington Beach, that use indirect rather than direct elections to choose their mayors.

There is only one city in Orange County with a population smaller than Newport Beach that elects its mayor directly: Stanton.

The current system of selecting the Newport Beach mayor from among the council members for a one-year term and limiting the mayor's role to presiding over the council meetings, works well. The system encourages collegiality among the members of the council, for each member either has served or is likely to serve soon as mayor. The system encourages the city staff to treat each member of the council with respect, not to defer to the powerful mayor and to slight the weaker council members.

To put the point another way, if we shift to the directly elected, more-powerful mayor envisaged by the proposal, the city manager would be demoted to something like chief-of-staff for the mayor. That would impede our ability to attract and retain a talented and dedicated city manager.

The current Newport Beach term limits ensure that no person serves on the city council for more than eight years. The proposed system would allow a person to serve on the city council for eight years and then serve another eight years as mayor. We should not create even the possibility of a single person having that length of tenure, that degree of control, over Newport Beach city government.

The proposal would make another key change in the city charter; it would give the mayor "sole discretion to set city council agendas" unless three out of the six other members of the city council vote to place an item on the agenda. It might appear that this is not much of a change, because at present the support of three council members is required to put an item on the agenda. In practice, however, this is a major change, because it gives the mayor sole power to set the agenda unless three of his colleagues disagree—something not likely to happen often. Moreover, under the current system, a council member can often get an item on the agenda indirectly, through the city manager. The proposed system would take away the power the city manager currently has to put items on the agenda—another diminution of her role.

The current system for selecting the mayor of Newport Beach has been in place for more than seventy years and has worked well. The advocates of the change have not pointed to any problem in the current system that needs to be fixed. They simply say that "the people should

elect the mayor” without noticing that there are many other mayors who are not directly elected. Why does Newport Beach need a directly elected mayor when so many other cities do so well with indirectly selected mayors?

The proponents of the changes to the charter have not cited any social science evidence that directly elected mayors “do better” than indirectly elected mayors.

It may be tempting for the city council, at the forthcoming meeting on October 26, to say “some people favor the proposal, some oppose the proposal, let us put the issue on the ballot and let the people decide.” That would be a mistake. We elect the city council to make some difficult decisions for us, including decisions on whether to place measures on the ballot. Not every measure that attracts some support (and I would note that we do not know how many people have signed the petition in favor of the change) deserves a place on the ballot. We already know enough to know that this measure would harm, rather than help, Newport Beach.

For all these reasons, I urge you to vote **NO** on the proposed city charter change.

Walter B. Stahr  
Newport Beach