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## **Citizen Charter Reform Petition Goes To City Clerk This Week** Accountability, Voter Participation Are Two Key Elements

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In March of 2001, Bonnie Lowenthal won the winner-take-all special election held for the vacant 1st District City Council seat. She received 1,179 votes. A year later, running unopposed for a full four-year term, she received 1,262 votes.

In June of 2000, Laura Richardson received 1,195 votes in winning the runoff for the open seat in the 6th Council District. In 1996, her predecessor, Doris Topsy-Elvord won reelection with 987 people voting for her.

Two years later, in 1998, Brian Young received 6,221 votes for the 5th Council District seat – and lost! More than five times as many Long Beach residents wanted Young as their representative than voted for Lowenthal, Richardson or Doris Topsy-Elvord.

About one-half of one percent of the city's registered voters elected Lowenthal and Richardson to office. Yet, the two have equal power on the nine-member city council when casting votes that decide the future of this city. Residents, on the other hand, get to vote once every four years for one of the nine councilpeople – people who have the power to change the lives of every resident and every business in this city.

Do you believe councilmembers should be accountable to more residents? Most people would say, "absolutely."

Today, Tuesday, March 28, a "Notice of Intent to Circulate Petition" will be submitted to the Long Beach City Clerk's Office by a group known as Citizens For A Better Long Beach. The petition presents, as a package, a series of changes to the city charter aimed at improving accountability, increasing voter participation, providing an opportunity for better addressing citywide concerns, eliminating the inherent conflict of interest of councilmembers drawing their own district boundaries, and strengthening the mayoral veto.

Here is a brief description of the key elements of the package:

### **Council Districts**

The city council will continue to be comprised of nine councilmembers, each serving a four-year term. Six (6) of these members will be elected solely by the voters residing in each of six newly formed districts. Three (3) members will be elected by all the voters of the city.

This system allows Long Beach residents to vote for four of the nine councilmembers: Their district representative and the three citywide members. Because of staggered elections (3 district and 1 citywide seat in one election, and two years later, 3 district and 2 citywide seats), residents will be able to vote for one or more of their representatives every two years, thus significantly increasing voter participation. Additionally, each district representative will be accountable to a larger number of people – and voters. Currently, each district is comprised of approximately 55,000 people. Under the proposed change, that number would increase to about 82,000 people.

“Our system of local government has become increasingly polarized and nonresponsive to the diverse needs and complex problems of our community,” says Frank Newell, a founding member of Citizens For A Better Long Beach. “The crux of the problem is that under the city charter, the manner in which councilmembers are elected contributes to councilmembers placing narrow, regional interests ahead of citywide concerns.” Newell is a local attorney and former chair of the city’s economic development commission.

“Under district-only elections, councilmembers focus on their portion of the city, and often with little or no concern for the overall needs of the city as a whole,” adds Robert Fronke, former city auditor and a founding member of the group. “None of the councilmembers are accountable to all the people of the city, which reduces the city council’s responsiveness to citywide interests and needs.”

The 6-3 system continues to protect district interests and concerns, say petition supporters. “The district representative, as now, will address district and neighborhood needs. That doesn’t change,” notes local banker Jane Netherton, another founding member. “But there are many citywide issues that need attention that are pushed aside because district representatives don’t have the time. The three representatives elected by all the voters will be able to focus on citywide issues and provide some much-needed long term planning and vision.”

## **Term Limits**

The proposal calls for maintaining the two-term limit for district representatives. There is also a two-term limit for the citywide representatives. However, the two terms apply separately to each office. One individual could, therefore, serve for 16 years.

“If, in the eyes of the voters, you are doing a good job as a district representative, that puts you in an excellent position to run and win citywide,” says another founding member, John Gooding, a local realtor. “However,” he adds, “if you have ignored district needs, your chances of winning citywide are diminished significantly. The proposed system allows individuals who have proven themselves to stay in office longer without changing the two-term limit. This enables us, the citizens of Long Beach, to keep good people in office longer.”

Another advantage, claim some supporters, is that the proposed system will help develop better leaders. Netherton points out: “Let’s say you run and win a district seat. You do a good job for those one or two terms, so now you run for a citywide council seat where you are accountable to all the voters. You win. After another one or two terms, you run for mayor. The people of Long Beach have had a chance to get to know you. You’re a known quantity. You have a voting record and ample city involvement by which people can judge you.”

## **Mayoral Veto**

Under the current system, on nearly all matters before the city council, it takes a simple majority, only five councilmembers, to override a mayor's veto. This makes the veto virtually meaningless. It also inhibits the ability of the mayor to prevent regional interests from dominating the citywide interests and needs of Long Beach. On all matters before the city council, Citizens For A Better Long Beach proposes a two-thirds majority to override a mayoral veto.

## **Redistricting**

Under the current system, councilmembers decide the boundaries of their own districts. This, in effect, says the Citizens For A Better Long Beach, allows councilmembers to choose their voters rather than the voters choosing their representatives. "This system promotes the self-interest of our councilmembers over the public good, leads to political maneuvering to aid regional interests, insulates councilmembers from citywide accountability, and results in a lack of attention to solving the major problems of the city," states Vic McCarty, the former managing partner of a major accounting firm in the city and a founding member of Citizens For A Better Long Beach.

The petitioners propose an independent commission comprised of Long Beach voters who, in public session, would set the boundaries of the six districts. The boundaries would be geographically compact and contiguous while maintaining neighborhood integrity and community of interest using visible geographic features and avoiding the dividing of census tracts.

To back up their call for an independent commission, petitioners point to the city's current 7th District. It stretches from Pacific Coast Highway at the L.A. city boundary up to Del Amo Boulevard and San Antonio Drive in Bixby Knolls. The district was carved up during the last redistricting process (2001), with little regard to neighborhood continuity.

## **Origins Of The Citizens Group**

For the past year, a small group of citizens has been meeting to discuss charter reform. They began last May by taking input from each councilmember. The group then, individually, met informally with scores of residents and businesspeople from throughout the city. The intent of the group was to find a middle ground that could be supported by not only councilmembers (who would place the recommendations on the ballot), but, more importantly, the voters.

"Finding a middle ground has not been easy," Fronke stresses. "We've spent hundreds of hours examining the pros and cons of a variety of systems, including those used in other cities. Everyone in our group is actively involved in the city. We came together because we are all concerned about the future of Long Beach. We all love our city."

After considerable debate, the group decided on a series of recommendations it would present to councilmembers. Last fall, meetings were again held with each councilmember to present the recommendations and receive input. Several councilmembers were in complete support of the proposals, others opposed part of them or wanted more information.

The group next met with a highly respected demographer to examine population statistics, and discussed its recommendations with two attorneys who have expertise involving the Voting Rights Act.

On January 6 of this year, each councilmember was hand-delivered a copy of the group's recommendations and asked if they would place it on the city council agenda so the package could be referred to the Charter Amendment Committee (which consists of the full council), where a full public airing of the suggestions could be discussed. Only one councilmember was willing to move forward. The others did not respond. The group was informed that since it's election season, no one wanted to be bothered with charter reform until after June.

On March 21, however, the city council – without any communication with the group which was pushing charter reform, and which had met with councilmembers on at least two occasions – voted to move forward on charter reform.

In the meantime, Citizens For A Better Long Beach – which includes the Business Journal and this writer – decided many weeks ago, following the lack of response from councilmembers, that it needed to move forward on a petition drive. On March 17, 40 people – including neighborhood leaders, current and past city commissioners and businesspeople from throughout the city – met to discuss the group's recommendations. The support to move forward with the initiative was overwhelming.

Once the city clerk receives the “Notice of Intent to Circulate Petition,” he delivers it to the city attorney, who within 15 days, will issue a title and summary. Thereafter, signature gathering can begin.

Anyone interested in supporting the initiative may, for now (until a phone number and office have been established), contact the Business Journal at 562/988-1222.