

If you're scratching your head on Ferndale's charter amendment, the answer should be, "No."

On June 14, 2010, Ferndale's city council passed ordinance #1094 which transfers supervisory responsibilities of the city clerk, police, and fire departments to the city manager. Basically, the city's charter is amended to read:

The Division of Law and Records and Division of Safety set forth in Chapter III, Section 11 of the Ferndale Charter, shall be under the supervision, direction and control of the City Manager.

In folks-like-us terms; the city clerk, fire chief, and police chief now report to the city manager.

A petition signed by over 450 registered voters suspended the ordinance, and on July 26, council voted to repeal the ordinance and put the issue on November 2nd's ballot.

There were three basic reasons residents signed the petition.

First, some like Ferndale's structure exactly the way the charter proscribes it, feeling the chiefs and clerk are more accountable to citizens if they work for council, whose members are directly accountable to voters than for the city manager who is not accountable to voters.

Second, others feel they'd already vetoed this idea the last time the charter was revised and the new arrangement was included.

Lastly, most signers objected to how council went about making the change. So important a topic as amending a city's charter is, voters felt the issue deserved some special explanation or even a special meeting dedicated to the topic. At such a meeting council could have provided specific benefits to the new arrangement, allayed voter anxieties about the clerk and chief's apparent demotions, provide examples on how the new arrangement will benefit citizens, and provide the dollar and time savings the budget and staff should expect to see.

Over four months later, council has yet to elaborate on the definition of "efficient" (in time and money--the best measurement of "efficiency") or explain why "being like other cities" is OK for some things and not others.

In simple terms, the ballot measure could ask, "Should the city create a layer of bureaucracy between public safety and city council? Given the amount of justification provided so far, the answer is no.

Or how about, "Should the city manager be given disciplinary powers over the fire chief, police chief, and city clerk?" Again, without justification as to why council-appointees should be castigated by anyone other than city council or citizens, the answer is no.

If after everything that's been said by council leaves you at all uncertain, the answer is still no. City charters, like constitutions, should not be amended or revised without clear understanding of the precise limits being expanded, created, or delegated. Nor should charters be amended for reasons that aren't definable.

Some people go to a restaurant planning to tip 20% then work their way down depending on the quality of service. Others start at 0% and work their way up. Ballots should be approved using the second approach--don't change what's already in-place without a clear and precise definition of the benefits. If the argument given is efficiency, then clear and precise is defined as dollars and hours.

Certainly, if council can make its case, and deliver to the Financial Planning Committee a commitment that this change will save \$437,930 annually, then a yes vote may make sense.

But unless proofs are given and can withstand scrutiny, voters should say, "No." Voting "No" will give council more time to consider if there are any time or dollar savings, time to survey other cities to see how they measure "efficiency," and provide an opportunity to hold a public hearing to share all their findings.

After four months, there's no rush, no imperative, no savings, no staff reductions, and no service improvements. And until proven otherwise, on November 2nd there should be no changes to the charter.