

Composition of City Council Deliberation Planning Document - June 6, 2023

What are the issues and concerns with City Council and its composition that the committee and Cambridge community have brought up? What does the committee want to try to address?

keeping the answer to this in mind as we move through the specific discussions

- I. [Does the committee want to recommend a change to how city councilors represent the city? Adding some or all district representation to the current all-at-large structure.](#)
- II. [Does the committee want to change the length of terms for city councilors \(or include staggered terms\)? Does the committee want to establish term limits for city councilors?](#)
- III. [Role of Mayor/Chair of City Council. How the mayor/chair is elected? What should the power and duties of the mayor/chair of city council be?](#)

I. Does the committee want to recommend a change to how city councilors represent the city? Adding some or all district representation to the current all-at-large structure.

Currently: Cambridge has 9 city councilors who all represent the whole city. They are elected using [proportional representation](#).

Cambridge Charter Language:

Section 96. *The city council shall consist of seven or nine members, as provided in this section, all of whom shall, at each regular municipal election, be elected **at large** for terms of two years each by proportional representation as hereinafter provided and shall serve until their successors are qualified. The city council in any city having seven wards or less at the time of adoption of this plan shall be composed of seven members and **the city council in any city having more than seven wards at the time of adoption thereof, nine members.***

Model City Charter (read more on pg. 14-16):

Alternative 1 - Option A - District elections of an even number of council members.

Alternative 1 – Option B - Combination of district and at-large elections of an even number of council members.

Alternative 1 – Option C - In small homogeneous communities, at-large elections of an even number of council members may be suitable.

Commentary

*The Model for the first time recommends district or a combination of districts and at-large seats on city councils be used to address diversity and representation issues. The 8th edition listed district and mixed election systems as one of several alternatives, listing them after the alternatives of at-large election with district residency requirements. At-large elections should only be considered as an alternative for small communities that are homogeneous or have no geographic concentration of underrepresented voters. Adding district residency requirements disperses the members of the council geographically, but all the members of the council can still be elected by the same majority. Under-representation of specific interests is always a potential outcome with at-large elections.

*If the mayor were elected by and from the council (§ 2.03(b), Alternative I), there would be an odd number of council members

Composition of City Councils in Other Cities

City	Pop.	Form of Government	Council Composition	Competition in District Elections
Boston, MA	617,459	Mayor-Council	4 at-large + 9 district councilors	'21 - 4/7 ward elections were unopposed '19 - 7/7 ward elections were unopposed '17 - 3/7 ward elections were unopposed
Somerville, MA	77,800	Mayor-Council	4 at large + 7 district councilors	'21 - 3/9 district elections were unopposed '19 - 4/9 district elections were unopposed '17 - 4/9 district elections were unopposed
Newton, MA	85,157	Mayor-Council	16 at-large + 8 district councilors	
Philadelphia, PA	1.576 million	Mayor-Council	7 at-large + 10 district councilors	'23 - 6/10 district elections were unopposed
Denver, CO	711,463	Mayor-Council	2 at-large + 11 district councilors	'23 - 0/8 district elections were unopposed
San Francisco, CA	815,201	Mayor-Council	11 district councilors	'22 - 1/5 district elections were unopposed '20 - 1/6 district elections were unopposed '18 - 0/5 district elections were unopposed
Lowell, MA	111,496	Council-Manager	3 at-large + 8 district councilors	'21 - 0/8 district elections were unopposed '19 & '17 - all councilors were at-large
Worcester, MA	205,272	Council-Manager	6 at-large + 5 district councilors	'21 - 2/5 district elections were unopposed '19- 4/5 district elections were unopposed '17 - 1/5 district elections were unopposed
Phoenix, AZ	1.625 million	Council-Manager	Mayor at-large + 8 district councilors	'22 - 1/4 district elections were unopposed '20 - 0/4 district elections were unopposed
Austin, TX	964,177	Council-Manager	Mayor at-large + 10 district councilors	'22 - 0/5 district elections were unopposed '20 - 0/5 district elections were unopposed '18 - 1/5 district elections were unopposed
Vancouver, WA	190,915	Council-Manager	Mayor + 7 Councilors at-large **voters elect mayor	'21 - 0/3 councilor elections were unopposed '19 - 1/4 councilor elections were unopposed '17 - 0/3 councilor elections were unopposed
Rockville, MD	67,139	Council-Manager	Mayor + 4 Councilors at-large **voters elect mayor	
Topeka, KS	125,963	Council-Manager	Mayor + 9 district councilors **voters elect mayor	'21 - 0/5 district elections were unopposed '19 - 1/4 district elections were unopposed '17 - 0/6 district elections were unopposed

[Public Comment:](#)
[Courbanize Feedback](#)

Out of about 47 public comments that stated an opinion on whether to maintain the all-at-large council or move towards some district representation 34 commenters were for maintaining the at-large system and 13 were for incorporating some district representation.

*you can read through the comments we've received in the links above

A few common themes and other ideas:

- "City Councilors should work together for the whole city. There's nothing good to come of pitting the various wards and neighborhoods against each other. "
- "Ward-based elections are less competitive, meaning less accountability and political engagement. Unlike ward-based and many state and national elections applicable to Cambridge, Cambridge City councilors must engage with and appeal to voters every election cycle, rather than running unopposed."
- "If incorporating district representation have multi-seat wards, for example - 3 districts with 3 councilors from each? "
- "Create a more diverse Combination District with a City-Wide-Based council: two Councilors from each of the 3 precinct-defined areas, and three Councilors chosen city-wide."

II. Does the committee want to change the length of terms for city councilors (or include staggered terms)? Does the committee want to establish term limits for city councilors?

Currently: Cambridge has 2-year terms for city councilors and no term limits.

Cambridge Charter Language:

Section 96. The city council shall consist of seven or nine members, as provided in this section, all of whom shall, at each regular municipal election, be elected at large for ***terms of two years*** each by proportional representation as hereinafter provided and shall serve until their successors are qualified. The city council in any city having seven wards or less at the time of adoption of this plan shall be composed of seven members and the city council in any city having more than seven wards at the time of adoption thereof, nine members.

Model City Charter (read more on pg. 14):

(b) Terms. The term of office of elected officials shall be four years elected in accordance with Article VI.

Commentary.

The Model recommends four-year, staggered terms (§ 6.03). Under this approach, elections of council members take place every two years. In the seventh edition, the Model listed concurrent terms as an alternative. However, a strong majority of cities have chosen staggered terms over concurrent terms to avoid dramatic changes in council composition at each election. The Model *does not restrict reelection* to subsequent four-year terms. Limiting reelection restricts the voters' opportunity to keep in office council members of whom they approve. Unlimited terms allow voters to provide a vote of confidence for council members who represent majority sentiment and a vote of opposition for members in the minority. Finally, the city benefits from the institutional memory of reelected council members.

Term Lengths & Limits of City Councilors in Other Cities

City	Pop.	Form of Government	Council Composition	Term Lengths + Limits
Boston, MA	617,459	Mayor-Council	4 at-large + 9 district councilors	2-year terms, no term limits
Somerville, MA	77,800	Mayor-Council	4 at large + 7 district councilors	2-year terms, no term limits
Newton, MA	85,157	Mayor-Council	16 at-large + 8 district councilors	2-year terms, no term limits
Philadelphia, PA	1.576 million	Mayor-Council	7 at-large + 10 district councilors	4-year terms, no term limits
Denver, CO	711,463	Mayor-Council	2 at-large + 11 district councilors	4-year terms, no term limits
San Francisco, CA	815,201	Mayor-Council	11 district councilors	4-year terms (staggered), limit of two 4-year consecutive terms
Lowell, MA	111,496	Council-Manager	3 at-large + 8 district councilors	2-year terms, no term limits
Worcester, MA	205,272	Council-Manager	6 at-large + 5 district councilors	2-year terms, no term limits
Phoenix, AZ	1.625 million	Council-Manager	Mayor at-large + 8 district councilors	4-year term (staggered), limit of two 4-year terms for mayor and three consecutive 4-year terms for councilors
Austin, TX	964,177	Council-Manager	Mayor at-large + 10 district councilors	4-year term (staggered). Limit of two 4-year consecutive terms
Vancouver, WA	190,915	Council-Manager	Mayor + 7 Councilors at-large **voters elect mayor	4-year term (staggered), no term limits
Rockville, MD	67,139	Council-Manager	Mayor + 4 Councilors at-large **voters elect mayor	4-year term, no term limits
Topeka, KS	125,963	Council-Manager	Mayor + 9 district councilors **voters elect mayor	4-year term (staggered), no term limit

[Public Comment:](#)

[Courbanize Feedback](#)

About 10 commenters mentioned an opinion about the length of term for councilors. Most were in favor of maintaining 2-year terms for councilors.

Common Statements / Ideas:

- “Please keep current 2 yr. City Council terms, NOT 4 yr. terms which would be far too long. We citizens need to maintain accountability from our elected council.”
- “I urge the City Council to retain the current 2-year City Council term and to reject the proposed 4-year term for the Council. It is my opinion that too many members of this Council are already far too unresponsive to current citizens and residents and a change from a 2-year term to a 4-year term will make this unacceptable situation even worse.”

III. Role of Mayor/Chair of City Council. How the mayor/chair is elected? What should the power and duties of the mayor/chair of city council be?

Currently: Cambridge's city council elects the mayor from among themselves. The mayor acts as the chair of the city council and the school committee. The mayor is the head of the city for ceremonial purposes.

Possible Additions to Mayor's Power and Duties (if council-manager structure)

1. Goal Setting: leading city council through (biannual?) city goal setting, in addition to language about the Mayor collaborating with the City Manager on city council budget priorities
2. Lead collaboration with City Manager on department head appointments, establishing priorities for candidates

Cambridge Charter Language:

Thereupon the city council shall, by a majority vote of all the members elected, elect a mayor and a vice-chairman from its own members and the persons elected as such shall likewise make oath to perform faithfully the duties of the respective offices to which they are so elected, and they may so make oath at the same meeting at which they are so elected.

The mayor, or the vice-chairman of the city council, or any four members thereof, or any three members thereof in the case of a city council composed of seven members, may at any time call a special meeting by causing written notices....

The mayor, if present, shall preside at the meetings and may vote.

The mayor shall be recognized as the official head of the city for all ceremonial purposes and shall be recognized by the courts for the purpose of serving civil process and by the governor for military purposes. In time of public danger or emergency, as determined by the city council, he may, with its consent, take command of the police, maintain order and enforce the laws; and he shall have all the authority and powers conferred upon mayors by sections eighteen and nineteen of chapter thirty-three. He shall be chairman of the city council and chairman of the school committee. He shall have no power to veto but shall have the same powers as any other member of either such body to vote upon all measures coming before it. He shall perform such other duties consistent with his office and with sections ninety-three to one hundred and sixteen, inclusive, as may be imposed upon him by the city council. ... The mayor shall have no power of appointment, except of the employees mentioned in section twenty-five and except as provided in section one hundred and two.

Model City Charter (read more on pg. 16-17):

Section 2.03. Mayor.

(a) Powers and Duties. The mayor shall be a voting member of the city council and shall attend and preside at meetings of the council, represent the city in intergovernmental relationships, appoint with the advice and consent of the council the members of community advisory boards

and commissions, present an annual state of the city message, appoint the members and officers of council committees, assign subject to the consent of council agenda items to committees, and perform other duties specified by the council. The mayor shall be recognized as head of the city government for all ceremonial purposes and by the governor for purposes of military law but shall have no administrative duties.

(b) Election. At each regular election the voters of the city shall elect a mayor at large for a term of [the same term as other council members] years. The council shall elect from among its members a deputy mayor who shall act as mayor during the absence or disability of the mayor and, if a vacancy occurs, shall become mayor for the remainder of the unexpired term.

Commentary

While the mayor of a council-manager city is not an executive as in the mayor-council form, he or she is uniquely positioned to be the political and policy leader of the city. As the presiding officer of the council and ceremonial head of the city, the mayor is the most conspicuous official of the city. Freedom from executive responsibilities for the day-to-day municipal operations allows the mayor to focus attention on major policy issues and important facilitative activities.

The mayor fills three facilitative roles that offer enormous leadership opportunities. First, the mayor may coordinate the activities of other officials by providing liaison between the city manager and the council, fostering a sense of cohesion among council members, and educating the public about the needs and prospects of the city. Second, the mayor may facilitate policy guidance through setting goals for the council and advocating the adoption of policies that address the city's problems. Third, the mayor is an ambassador who promotes the city and represents it in dealing with other governments as well as the public.

Finally, the mayor delivers the state of the city message. When the state of the city message includes the setting out of needs and goals for the city, it should reflect the thinking of the council and information provided by the staff, as well as the mayor's own priorities. In presenting the state of the city message, the mayor acts as spokesperson, educator, team leader, goal setter, and policy advocate. To avoid confusion, the time of delivery of the message should be sufficiently distanced from the presentation of the budget by the manager.

Other Communities Election and Role of Chair of City Council / Mayor

In most Council-Manager city charters the language about the powers and duties of mayor (chair of city council) is similar - 1) head of the city for ceremonial purposes and service of civil process, 2) no veto power, but all other powers of city councilors, 3) preside over council meetings, 4) have no regular administrative duties

In Mayor-Council city charters the powers and duties given to the city council president or chair of city council are even less - the city council president presides over council meetings, and serves as acting mayor in the event of a vacancy

A few examples of language from other charters:

Philadelphia, PA

“Council’ it shall elect a president from among its members and a chief clerk who shall not be a member.”

San Francisco, CA

“the Board of Supervisors shall by majority vote elect one of its members as President for a two-year term”

Worcester, MA

All candidates nominated in the preliminary election for the office of councilor at large in accordance with section 7-4, shall appear on the ballot as candidates for councilor at large in the regular municipal election and shall also be listed on a separate portion of the ballot as candidates for the office of mayor. The candidate elected to the office of councilor at large and receiving the highest number of votes for the office of mayor shall be mayor.

Powers / Duties

- The official head of the city
- No veto power, but the same powers as other city councilors
- Chair of school committee

Phoenix, AZ

“The Mayor shall be elected from the City at large,

The Mayor shall be recognized as the official head of the City by the courts for the purpose of service of civil process upon the City and the instituting of any action or proceeding at law or equity for and in behalf of the City, and appearing in any manner before the courts on behalf of the City; he shall be recognized by the governor and other State officials as the chief and official head of the City.”

Austin, TX

“(1)a mayor elected from the city at-large”

“The mayor shall preside at all meetings of the council and shall be recognized as head of the city government for all ceremonial purposes, for the purpose of receiving service of civil process, and for military purposes, but he or she shall have no regular administrative duties. The mayor, as a member of the council, shall be entitled to vote upon all matters considered by the council, but shall have no veto power.”