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July 2, 2009

Charter Review Committee
Sacramento City Hall
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Honorable Members of the Charter Review Committee:

This is an op-ed piece I wrote for the Sacramento Bee a decade ago. It was published on September 14, 1989, with a few editorial changes but nothing substantive. It was given the headline "The idea of a "strong mayor": The wrong idea.

Although the committee writing a new charter at that time had a different mission - i.e. consolidation of city and county governments, I believe the issues regarding a "strong mayor" form are still relevant.

Respectfully,

Anne Rudin

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Submitted as Op-Ed piece to Sacramento Bee 9-7-89

MAYOR ANNE RUDIN

Consolidation of Governments in the Sacramento area has been an issue for several decades. Over the past 30 years there have been three successful mergers of City and County functions: health departments, tax assessment and collection, and the library systems. There have also been two failed efforts: merger of City and County Governments which was on the ballot in 1974, and the recent attempt to consolidate City and County Animal Control. It has largely been through joint powers agreements and City-County Task Forces addressing single issues or performing certain functions that the needed collaboration and coordination has occurred.

Something more formal must be done. Jurisdictional and territorial imperatives intrude, and conflicting interests defy resolution in the absence of a centralized authoritative arbiter.

The current effort of government reorganization, like those that have preceded it, is an attempt to promote efficiency and effectiveness in local government while preserving citizen involvement and control of decision making. If successful, it will unite all of Sacramento under one government, to enable integrated planning for land use, transportation, air quality, water supply, solid waste management, and myriad

other municipal services. No one has yet disputed the need for these services. Tremendous area wide growth has brought the need for integrated planning and provision of services to a critical point.

Bringing the elected officials together as a single, full-time governing body will facilitate the decision making process. Establishment of 20 local community councils will give maximum opportunity for citizen involvement and local decision making.

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On the whole, the charter proposed by the Charter Commission is very well considered. But how will it measure up to the expectations for economy, efficiency, and strong leadership?

One of the most important and striking features of the proposed charter is the "strong mayor". The term "strong mayor" conjures up the image of past autocratic big city mayors elected on party tickets. However, political patronage has generally been replaced by professional administration, stronger civil service systems, and non-partisan elections, making the old image archaic. The "strong mayor" is the chief executive and is responsible for overall administration. He or she hires and fires department heads, appoints boards and commission members, has power to veto, prepares and presents the budget, and recommends policies for council action.

The Charter Commission bypassed this model in favor of a mayor with fewer absolute powers. Established as a separate executive branch, the proposed mayor's strength would derive from the following:

- hiring, with consent of council, a Chief Administrative Officer (CAO); supervising and removal of the CAO;
- preparing, with advice of CAO, an annual budget and submitting it to the council of supervisors;
- power to veto ordinances and resolutions; but could be overridden by 8 votes of the council;
- appointing, with approval of the council and removing members of boards and commissions.

The proposed charter gives the mayor the power to propose what the mayor envisions, presumably implementing the platform on which he or she was elected. However, the Council disposes. Except for the power of veto and the responsibility for the budget, the new powers are not significantly greater than those which Sacramento's charter now provides. The mayor must have the consent of the Council to appoint boards and commissions and shares responsibility for hiring the CAO with the Council. Is this worth the divisiveness the proposed form would bring?

I believe that the proposed structure will create a relationship between the mayor and council that will be highly separatist and adversarial. Under the new system, the mayor does not sit with or vote with the council in its deliberations. This can only invite polarization, second guessing, and buck passing, rather than consensus building. It encourages interests to play off one side against the other without the public debate between the mayor and council that leads to conflict resolution and consensus. The remedy to this potential political polarization is to have the mayor sit as a member of the council, debating and voting on issues with the other supervisors. This form allows for the process of public debate and the forging of joint agreements which are so important in the shaping of public policy.

Another concern I have is the increase in staff that will be necessary with separate executive and legislative branches. If the mayor appoints and supervises the CAO, but the council has legislative responsibility for all county functions, to whom will the CAO be answerable? Each will need information and assistance from the CAO and county staff who will be caught between the council's demands and those of the mayor, with the mayor being the immediate supervisor. This will be another thorn in the adversarial mayor-council relationship. One might reasonably expect considerable conflict and competition for staff services as well as dispute about the

loyalty of the CAO.

What if plans and policies of the council are not consistent with the mayor's? How will they be reconciled or resolved? Council staff, paralleling the mayor's, is likely to develop. The council will surely need its own budget officer to review and evaluate the mayor's budget. One can see the beginnings of a legislative staff to monitor and challenge the executive staff. Given the adversarial competitive design, this would inevitably grow. Staff costs could rise to match or exceed the presumed savings of consolidation.

We must ask if the proposal which has been advanced will serve the cause of good government and promote coherent policy making for the public good. Or, will it result in time consuming political maneuvering, more appropriate to partisan systems?

It is not necessary to establish a separate executive branch in order for the mayor to have stronger powers and greater responsibilities. The mayor can be a participating voting member of the council, with less polarization and suspicion and more public deliberation and consensus building.

We should not confuse power and leadership. No charter provision can confer leadership qualities upon a person. It's a matter of personal skill, popularity, resourcefulness,

trust, and courage to be out in front of the issues. Leadership is also in having an articulated direction for seeking solutions to problems. Most leaders have to grow into this role. A legal mandate won't do it.

There have been strong leaders with almost no legitimate power. There have been weak leaders with strong constitutional mandates. When given the resources, i.e. staff and budget, the right person has been able to be highly effective.

Under the new charter, there is very little the mayor can do without the consent and support of the council. Why not have them working together on one board? Sharing of responsibilities and power, hallmarks of a democracy, require cooperation and consensus building, much easier to achieve when all are seated at the same table.

Let us lay a firm foundation for a new government that will serve Sacramento for the future. Rather than invite conflict, let us encourage consensus. By eliminating provisions for a separate executive branch while maintaining increased powers for the mayor, the proposed consolidated government can deal with complex issues, develop well-considered policies and effectively execute them.

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