

FAQs on Government Reform Initiative

Q.What are the major reform proposals?

A. There are two major parts to the initiative:

First, that Alder committee appointments should be made by the Council President rather than the Mayor. Second, that the Board of Estimates be re-named the Finance Committee and that its members should elect the chair rather than have the mayor as a voting member and chair of a legislative committee.

Q. Why are these initiatives necessary? What problems do they address?

A. These initiatives re-balance powers between the executive and legislative branches of city government. For the legislative branch to have integrity as a separate branch of government it should appoint its own members to committees and chair the committee overseeing city finances.

For the Council to have integrity as a separate governing body, it must have the authority to “run its own house.” Currently, the Mayor appoints Council members to committees. We propose that the Council President have that authority. The Mayor would retain the authority to appoint all citizen members of city committees.

Q. How will this benefit the public?

A: As the legislative body, the Council is closest to the residents of the city. Members regularly meet with constituents, local groups and have a greater immediate awareness of the issues closest to our communities. Rebalancing powers and resources between the legislative and executive branches enhances local control and a more responsive government.

Q: What are the proposed changes to the Board of Estimates?

A: First, we propose to change the name of the body from the archaic “Board of Estimates” to a more descriptive “Finance Committee.” Second, committee membership would be comprised of seven Alders selected by the current Council President with a preference for appointing past Council Presidents. Third, the Chair would be elected by the Committee.

To some degree this rebalances the powers of the Mayor who writes the budget, appoints the members of the committee that reviews the budget and then chairs the same committee.

Q: Are these initiatives an attack on the Mayor?

A: These proposals address an on-going systemic problem that persists whoever is mayor. Even if these proposals were to be implemented, the major power in city government would continue to reside with the mayor (executive). The mayor would continue to appoint senior managers and oversee all departments, have a Mayoral staff of four Deputies and six assistants, develop the budget and even chair the meetings of the council.

Q: Do the proposed changes represent common and best practices in governance?

A: The practice of instituting separate and equal branches of government is thousands of years old. However, more immediately (and locally) they also represent the most common practice of governance in most Wisconsin cities, state government and Dane County. ·

Q: Are there any other improvements proposed in the initiatives?

A: The other proposed reforms are to make the office of Council President a two-year term. This will provide greater continuity in leadership. One-year terms in office are extremely rare.

Second, we propose to change the name of the Common Council Organizational Committee to the Common Council Executive Committee for clarity to the public on its function.

Q: Is there a timetable for the introduction of the measures?

A: The earliest date for introduction is the council meeting of April 19th. We hope the reform measures will be approved by the Council on May 17.

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