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City of Gainesville Policy Program Preliminary Research & Analysis

TOPIC: Strong Mayor-Council Form of Government
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OBJECTIVE

Research alternative structures for Mayor/Commissioner forms of government in the City of Gainesville.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The way in which a city is structured influences the operations of that city, from the way city officials interact to the policies that are implemented. There are two primary local government structures, a weak mayor system, also known as the council-manager system, and a strong mayor system, also known as a mayor-council system. The terms “strong” and “weak” are not a judgement on the effectiveness of the mayor, but rather it distinguishes the level of administrative authority assigned to the mayor in the municipal charter. The weak mayor structure is characterized by an appointed, or hired, city manager who handles the day to day operations of the city, while the strong mayor is characterized by the elected mayor serving as the chief executive. There is significant variability within each style, and the executive authority within a city operates on a spectrum rather than soundly within the two established categories.

The City of Gainesville currently operates under a weak mayor structure, as the mayor serves in a primarily ceremonial role while the appointed city manager is the chief executive of the city.

HISTORY/BACKGROUND INFORMATION

There are two primary local government structures, a weak mayor (or council-manager) system, or a strong mayor (mayor-council) system. However, these structures operate much more as a spectrum of executive authority rather than two set categories. In a system with the weakest mayor, the mayor is a purely ceremonial position and sits on and presides over the city commission. In the strongest mayor system, the mayor no longer sits on the city commission or votes in commission meetings, but may assign commission members to chair or serve on committees, appoint citizens to serve on advisory boards or commissions, prepare the annual budget, have veto authority over the city commission, and run the day to day operations of the city.¹

Weak Mayor System

In a traditional weak mayor system, a city manager, appointed by the city commission, serves as the chief executive of the city. The city manager is in charge of hiring and firing city employees, day to day city operations, and the annual budget. However, there is still variance within weak mayor systems. In the system with the “weakest” mayor, a mayor is elected by their colleagues on the commission, rather than being directly elected by the public. In this system, the mayor is almost entirely a ceremonial position, serving as a representative for the city and serving as the presiding officer of city commission meetings. A weak mayor additionally may have the authority to appoint commission members to subcommittees.

This system is closest to what the City of Gainesville has, although Gainesville, like some weak mayor systems, directly elects the mayor rather than having them appointed by the commission, a practice done in the City prior to 1998. Despite this flexibility regarding whether or not the mayor is directly elected or appointed, most weak mayor systems are very similar in that they **give mayors no additional authority outside of acting as the presiding officer of the city commission.**

This system of governance is most popular in small to mid-sized cities.²

Strong Mayor System

The key feature of a strong mayor system is that the mayor serves as the city’s chief executive, however the extent of executive authority provided to that mayor can vary significantly. In strong mayor systems, the mayor may or may not sit on the city commission. In some systems, the mayor continues to be the presiding officer of the city commission, while in others the mayor does not sit on the commission but rather has the capacity to serve as a tie-breaking vote if necessary.

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https://books.google.com/books?id=mLSYDdAaqUAC&pg=PA264&lpg=PA264&dq=richmond+virginia+switch+from+weak+mayor+to+strong+mayor&source=bl&ots=vYmZO9I3c&sig=ACfU3U3SoaQ7I54iInlqvjl7WTNiaN0Cw&hl=en&sa=X&ved=2ahUKEwj3x_ii_ZLoAhVpnuAKHeAsCiIQ6AEwDXoECAsQAQ#v=onepage&q=richmond%20virginia%20switch%20from%20weak%20mayor%20to%20strong%20mayor&f=false

² https://icma.org/sites/default/files/302618_Council-Manager%20or%20Strong%20Mayor%20-%20The%20Choice%20is%20Clear.pdf

In the “weakest” strong mayor system, the mayor has **hiring and firing capacities of charter officers and/or department heads**, but still maintains a singular vote on the commission and takes on no other “administrative” responsibilities. Under these circumstances, the city commission generally has to confirm or ratify the mayor’s decisions. Additional powers that may be granted to a strong mayor are the authority to **prepare the annual budget** and some **veto authority over the commission**. In a strong mayor system, the city will often **appoint a city administrator to handle day to day operations** of the city.³ Generally, the mayor is given the authority to choose this individual, however their hiring must be confirmed by the city commission. When a city administrator is hired, they serve under the mayor on a full-time basis, and are typically responsible for budget preparation, personnel administration, and the daily supervision of departments, much like a city manager. This can free the mayor from the need to attend to administrative details and allow them to focus greater attention on policy development and political leadership. If the city chooses not to appoint a city administrator, the position of mayor would almost certainly have to be a full-time job.⁴

This system is most popular among larger cities, although some smaller to mid-sized cities have also adopted this structure.⁵

State of Florida

Approximately two-thirds of the cities within the State of Florida have a Council-Weak Mayor form of government.⁶ While the strong mayor form of government is most commonly associated with larger cities, such as Tampa, Jacksonville, St. Petersburg, and Orlando, smaller cities more similar in size to Gainesville, such as Plantation, Pensacola, West Palm, and Palmetto, Florida also operate under the strong mayor system.⁷

City of Gainesville

Currently, the City of Gainesville has a hybrid weak mayor system. The Mayor of Gainesville is directly elected, generally a feature of strong mayor systems; however, the position is largely ceremonial. The Mayor of Gainesville serves as the presiding officer at City Commission meetings, but does not serve as the city’s chief executive. Instead, the City Commission appoints a City Manager, who serves as the chief executive and runs the day to day operations of the city.

In Gainesville, the charter officer positions are appointed by the City Commission as a body, and can be removed from their positions by the City Commission. There is no individual commissioner in Gainesville with authority over the charter officers.

³ https://www.richmond.com/news/local/years-after-switch-to-an-elected-mayor-richmond-government-still/article_dcc33f52-d6d6-51f7-995b-61eedde46678.html

⁴ <http://mrsc.org/getdoc/88bd80e7-61ce-49ba-a848-0b2c070c3ef9/Trends-in-Forms-of-Government-in-Washington-Cities.aspx>

⁵ <https://thebalancecareers.com/strong-mayor-form-of-government-1669486>

⁶ <http://www.floridaleagueofcities.com/docs/default-source/CMRI/2016citieswithformofgov3c9fb3c41a9e6c4e8be5ff0000e8da5f.pdf?sfvrsn=0>

⁷ http://www.floridaleagueofcities.com/docs/default-source/cmri/2019alphabycountywithgovtpopulation.pdf?sfvrsn=db7d5d5_0

The Gainesville City Charter creates this structure, and any change would require a charter amendment.⁸

PRELIMINARY RESEARCH AND FINDINGS

The following section will highlight the different governmental structures of a series of municipalities across the country, beginning with examples of “weaker” strong mayor systems and ending with examples of very strong mayor systems. This section will also highlight other municipalities which have transitioned from a weak mayor system to a strong mayor system.

Goose Creek, South Carolina

Goose Creek is an example of a strong mayor system where the mayor has very limited authority. The mayor still sits on the city council, and has a series of additional powers outlined in the city charter, including:

- The mayor is the Chief Executive Officer and shall exercise all powers and authority vested in the officer by the ordinances of the city and the laws of the state.
- In addition to the powers and duties exercised and required by law or ordinance, the mayor is responsible for ensuring that the ordinances and laws of the city are executed and enforced, to monitor the conduct of operational management and subordinates, and, as far as it is in the mayor’s power, ensure that all negligence, carelessness, and violations of duty are prosecuted and punished.
- Mayor has full authority to investigate the books, papers, and records of the officers of the city, whenever, in the mayor’s opinion, it may be necessary, or appoint others to do so.
- The mayor, at the first meeting after their inauguration, must call for an election at which one of the council members may be elected pro tempore. This person will act as mayor in the absence of the mayor.
It is the special duty of the mayor to take prompt measures for the preservation of good order in the city.

- In practice, however, **while the mayor has the power to give orders to city staff and to fire nearly every city employee, those duties fall to a hired city administrator**, who is responsible for handling the day to day operations in the city. The only individuals who the mayor and the city administrator do not have the power to fire are the charter officers (the city administrator, the city clerk, and the city attorney), as those individuals can only be removed through a majority vote from the city council. Due to the fact that the city administrator takes on most of the day to day operations of the city, **the mayor in Goose Creek remains a part time position**, and the mayor is paid \$30,000/year, while council members are paid just over \$7,000/year.

While **the mayor is responsible for setting the meeting agenda for the city council** (with input from councilmembers), they maintain a single vote on the council. All legislative powers of the city remain

⁸ https://library.municode.com/fl/gainesville/codes/code_of_ordinances?nodeId=PTICHLA

with the city council, and the city council additionally has the power to remove the charter officers by a majority vote. In Goose Creek, **the mayor does not have any additional veto or budgetary authority.**⁹

The City of Goose Creek never “switched” to the strong mayor structure, but rather was originally created with this structure.

Mount Pleasant, South Carolina

While the town of Mount Pleasant still has a weak mayor form of government, there has been a **push in recent years for a switch to a strong mayor system.** The current mayor of the town works part-time, and their only additional powers outside of serving as a council member is that they chair council meetings and they appoint council members to subcommittees. The town has a hired administrator to enact policies and run the city’s daily operations. Currently, the mayor is paid \$42,000/year, but does not have any staff.¹⁰

A shift to a strong mayor would give the town a full-time, elected executive, who would not only chair the city council but also act as the city’s full-time administrator. While this idea has floated around Mount Pleasant for years, the town council has never agreed to put the issue before voters. **Currently, the city council is hearing presentations from supporters and opponents of the initiative to inform their vote of whether the shift to strong mayor will appear on the ballot.** Critics of the system argue that it would do nothing to quell infighting among the council, and may in fact make the matter worse due to the creation of an imbalance of power among the councilmembers. Supporters, meanwhile, have advocated for the city’s chief executive to be an elected, rather than appointed, position to make the individual more accountable to voters. In an exit poll conducted after the 2018 midterm elections, there appeared to be broad support for making such a change, as those surveyed favored the shift by a 68-32 margin.¹¹

Pensacola, Florida

One Florida city which switched from a council-manager to council-strong mayor system in recent years is Pensacola, Florida. In 2009, Pensacola residents voted to adopt a new city charter which placed executive powers in the hands of a full-time mayor, with the official change occurring in 2010. The initiative passed with 55.17% of the vote, however it should be noted that the election was a mail in only election that had approximately 37% voter turnout. The proposal included charter revisions such as: removing the mayor as a voting member of the council (although they would preside over council meetings); setting the mayor and council’s compensation by city ordinance and subject to change every

⁹ <https://www.live5news.com/2019/06/11/mount-pleasant-consider-changing-form-government/>

¹⁰ https://www.moultrienews.com/news/mount-pleasant-discusses-district-representation-and-alternate-forms-of-government/article_e67b5a42-5fba-11ea-a087-93d5795510c6.html

¹¹ https://www.postandcourier.com/opinion/editorials/editorial-let-mount-pleasant-voters-decide-on-strong-mayor/article_6fc7e11c-2291-11ea-958a-8b8f10b9131d.html

year (currently, the mayor's salary is \$100,000 annually)¹²; and allowing the city attorney to be appointed by the mayor with approval from the majority of the council.¹³

From 1931 to 2010, Pensacola had used the council-manager form of government, with a professional city manager managing the city's day to day operations. Five years after the change, a survey found that while 26% of city residents felt the city was headed in the right direction in 2008, that number increased to 79% in 2015. This is primarily due to a series of economic development victories, including recruiting new industries into the city and revitalizing the financial sector, which took place in the years following the governance shift, which many local business leaders believe is due to the city's first strong mayor's efforts and leadership.¹⁴ However, since the change there have been other proposed charter amendments by city councilmembers to limit the mayor's powers, but those efforts have not been successful.¹⁵ According to the Florida League of Cities, the shift to a strong mayor system is rare, with Pensacola being the only switch within the last 15 years.¹⁶

Pueblo, Colorado

In November of 2017, Pueblo, Colorado, voters approved a switch to a strong mayor form of government. **The effort to switch structures began in 2015**, and for two years the "Committee to Elect a Mayor" discussed and worked on the proposal to change to a strong mayor form of government. This proposal was finalized in 2017, and the city council approved the ballot measure to appear on the November 2017 ballot.¹⁷ **The city officially changed structures in January of 2019, with the election for the mayor having been held in November of 2018.**

The first mayor will serve a five-year term, while following mayors will serve a standard four-year term. Prior to the vote, Pueblo operated under the council-manager form, with no official mayor and instead an elected "council president", who presided over the city council. All of the city's daily operations were conducted by a city-council appointed city manager. Under the previous council-manager system, the city manager appointed all department heads in the city, which did not need to be approved by the city council.¹⁸ **The Committee's initiative granted the power to appoint department heads to the elected mayor, but all of the mayor's department head positions must be confirmed by the city council.** With the exception of the department heads, **other city employees' hiring process remained the same**, overseen by the independently elected Civil Service Commission. The Civil Service Commission is a three member, elected body of individuals who are not otherwise employed by the city which establishes position eligibility lists for city jobs, locates and identifies the best candidates for the city's positions which are not appointed by the city council, and hears appeals relating to classification, reclassification and allocation of positions. Beyond this, **the mayor controls and directs the executive branch, and is the official head of the city for all ceremonial purposes.** Additionally, **the mayor is not a**

¹² <https://www.jacksonville.com/story/news/coronavirus/2020/03/23/coronavirus-florida-pensacola-mayor-donates-salary-to-pay-residents-bills-for-trash-pickup-natural-gas/112251522/>

¹³ https://ballotpedia.org/Pensacola_City_Charter_Referendum,_2009

¹⁴ <https://www.businessobserverfl.com/article/punch-line-no-more>

¹⁵ <https://thepulsepensacola.com/2016/06/pensacola-councilwoman-wants-to-scrap-strong-mayor-charter/>

¹⁶ <https://www.businessobserverfl.com/article/punch-line-no-more>

¹⁷ <https://www.csindy.com/TheWire/archives/2017/10/16/pueblo-to-vote-on-strong-mayor-form-of-government>

¹⁸ <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2019-02-22/why-pueblo-colorado-decided-to-have-a-mayor-again>

sitting member of the city council. Accompanying the strong mayor's authority is a **\$150,000 annual salary**, as the city wanted the mayor to be a full-time, rather than part time position.¹⁹

Pueblo also allows the newly elected mayor to appoint a **deputy mayor, who shares administrative duties with the mayor and acts in a similar capacity as a city administrator.**²⁰ The deputy mayor is an appointed, not elected, position.

Pueblo modeled their structure after Colorado Springs, which adopted a strong-mayor system in 2010. The two towns share similar features (**both cities contain upwards of 50% of their county populations, and both are becoming more ethnically diverse**). As cities get larger, there are economic, labor, and policing problems where a strong mayor can be more relevant. One individual elected at-large who is responsible for the whole community is better at brokering problems than a city council.²¹

Pueblo voted against a similar plan in 2009, with the majority of residents agreeing that the switch would bog down city governance in politics. This worry was shown to be not entirely unfounded, as **bureaucratic adjustments to the strong mayor system have proven to be challenging**. For instance, operational changes which in theory should be simple, like appointing a chief of staff for the mayor or hiring a public information officer, have been difficult due to determinations of whether such changes would need a charter amendment. Therefore, attention should be given to clearly defining the roles and responsibilities a strong mayor would have. Furthermore, **the primary distinction between the 2009 failure and the 2017 success is that, in 2017, the city council did not actively fight the proposal, and there was a greater understanding among the public of the need for and purpose of the switch.**²² The messaging remained largely the same, however the campaign for strong mayor was much more established for the 2017 election, having put in public education work months before the election, and the fine details of the initiative were decided on well before the public voted on the initiative. Additionally, in 2016 voters had approved a street-repair fee, which took the city more than a year to develop a rate structure, let alone levy it. This type of delay on city operations helped push public opinion towards the switch.²³ Finally, Colorado Springs switching their system in 2010 showed Pueblo voters that such a change was possible.²⁴

West Jordan, Utah

In November of 2017, residents of West Jordan approved a ballot measure to switch the city to a strong mayor government structure. The initiative went before the city council in January of 2017, and the city council approved, in a 4-3 vote, a resolution to put the proposed change on the November ballot.²⁵ **The critiques of the strong mayor form of government included increased government costs** (the 2020 budget included an allocation of \$186,182 for changing the form of government, which accounted for

¹⁹ https://library.municode.com/co/pueblo/codes/code_of_ordinances?nodeId=CH_ART4MA

²⁰ https://library.municode.com/co/pueblo/codes/code_of_ordinances?nodeId=CH_ART4MA

²¹ <https://www.citylab.com/life/2019/02/pueblo-colorado-mayor-nick-gradisar-cities-without-mayors/583339/>

²² <https://www.chieftain.com/678c8ef0-c4ec-52df-80a8-68e162e74056.html>

²³ <https://www.citylab.com/life/2019/02/pueblo-colorado-mayor-nick-gradisar-cities-without-mayors/583339/>

²⁴ <https://www.chieftain.com/pueblowestview/f6276032-4f76-595e-a51e-2b9170a4319e.html>

²⁵ <https://www.abc4.com/news/local-news/west-jordan-to-swear-in-new-leaders-new-form-of-government/#:~:text=In%202017%2C%20citizens%20voted%20to,at%20West%20Jordan%20City%20Hall.>

only half the cost of the change, with the other half being reflected in the 2021 fiscal year) **and unequal distribution of power**. These increased costs came from the addition of an at-large councilmember, the mayor's new salary, the creation of an intergovernmental liaison position, and the creation of a council director position.²⁶ Additionally, there was concern about an inability to return to a council-manager form of government if the strong mayor system failed. Finally, **there were questions raised about the limited qualifications required to be mayor**, with a current council member saying that under the strong mayor system you "only have to be 18 and popular to become the CEO of a \$160 million corporation".

Despite these concerns, the measure very narrowly passed by a margin of 68 votes, and the city elected its first strong mayor in November of 2019.²⁷ Under the new system, **the mayor serves a four-year term, and is limited to two terms**. The **mayor no longer serves as part of the city council**, and the city manager is no longer a charter officer. The **mayor is additionally able to appoint, with the council's advice and consent, a city administrator to handle daily operations, charter officers and department heads, and members of standing committees, boards, and commissions**. The **mayor is able to appoint, without the council's advice and consent, all other appointed at-will employee positions and the members of each temporary committees, boards, and commissions**.²⁸

In addition to employment duties, the **mayor provides to the council a written report setting forth budget appropriations, and is responsible for implementing directions given by the council and giving advice to the council in regards to implementation of policy**.²⁹

Oakland, California

Measure X was a ballot measure passed in 1998 which changed Oakland from a council-manager (weak mayor) form of government to a strong mayor form of government. The measure **changed the city manager to a city administrator**, who reports directly to the mayor. The city council has to ratify appointment to this position. The **mayor was removed from their position on the city council, and was given a two-term limit**. The **mayor was additionally granted the power to hire and fire department heads, the city administrator, and board members**, while the city council was given the authority to make board and commission appointments if the mayor neglects to fill them. The **mayor also prepares the initial budget for submission to the city council**. The measure gave the entire city council a pay raise, and **switched the city attorney from an appointed to a popularly elected position**.

Originally, this measure was passed with a sunset provision, as **the initiative was meant to be a trial run of 6 years** that would end in 2004 without additional action from voters. In 2002, the mayor put the strong mayor back on the ballot for permanent re-authorization, however this was done very quickly

²⁶ https://110f7f1f-8bd4-4339-9cff-f4eafb4eb510.filesusr.com/ugd/399582_a792ba7ac35740e1b438d222dc720051.pdf

²⁷ <https://www.deseret.com/utah/2019/8/9/20799835/west-jordan-preparing-to-elect-strong-mayor-as-part-of-new-form-of-government>

²⁸ https://codelibrary.amlegal.com/codes/westjordanut/latest/westjordan_ut/0-0-0-440

²⁹ <https://www.westjordanjournal.com/2020/01/06/294213/a-new-face-for-west-jordan>

without much public communication and the measure did not pass. However, it was placed back on the 2004 ballot as originally expected and passed with 70% approval.

There has been a history of these efforts in Oakland. Similar attempts were tried in 1984, 1992, 1996, and finally 1998, when the initiative was successful. **Measure F, the initiative attempted in 1996, was much larger and more complicated** than the ultimately successful Measure X. Measure F attempted to add another at-large council member to replace the mayor, while Measure X simply gave the mayor a vote in the event of a council tie. Measure F sought to entirely get rid of the city manager position, although it did say that if the mayor chose they could appoint a city administrator, while Measure X kept the city manager position but changed the organization chart so that the position reported to the mayor, not the council.³⁰

San Diego, California

San Diego switched to a strong mayor-council form of government on January 1, 2006. The system was **approved by voters in November 2004 as a six-year pilot experiment** that would end in December of 2010 unless additional action was taken prior to the expiration date. Ultimately, the initiative was extended permanently. While attempts at shifting to a strong mayor had been made in San Diego regularly since the 1970s, **voter discontent during the city's pension and securities scandal in 2004 made the switch happen.** The original vote passed with 51% approval, despite major opponents of the switch arguing that the system would cost the government more money.³¹ Previously, the nine-member city council, which included the ceremonial mayor with a single vote, appointed an unelected city manager who was the chief executive with all of the authority most associated with such a position, including running the day to day operations of the city.

San Diego's shift to strong mayor was largely backed by the business community, which blamed the manager-run system for the budget shortfall and the underfunding of the city pension plan. They ultimately claimed that city managers have lacked the political strength and mandate to deal effectively with excessive demands from public employee unions.³² Additionally, the consultant group Strong Mayor Council Institute assisted the city with the shift.

In the new system, the city council and its powers stayed the same, but the authority to select the city's chief executive was transferred from the city council to the voters of San Diego. The **mayor was removed from the city council** and established an entirely separate executive branch of government. The **city council selected a presiding officer and appointed an Independent Budget Analyst to review and provide budget information** to the city council, independent from the mayor. Additionally, **the city council added a new independent legislative analysis function.** The **mayor became responsible and accountable for day to day administration** of city government. They **propose the city budget, appoint department heads, and have veto and line item veto authority over legislation and budgetary matters.** For instance, if the budget is modified by the council, it is returned to the mayor who has the authority

³⁰ https://localwiki.org/oakland/Measure_X

³¹ <https://www.voiceofsandiego.org/topics/news/strong-mayor-wins-with-huge-support/>

³² <https://www.governing.com/topics/mgmt/Mayor-Manager-Conundrum.html>

to approve, veto, or modify any line item approved by the council. The council then has 5 business days to override any vetoes or modifications made by the mayor.³³

Since the 2004 initiative, an additional at-large council seat was created, returning the council to its original nine members. The veto authority for the council is now a traditional two-thirds number.³⁴

Efforts to Switch Systems That Were Unsuccessful

Several cities across the country have attempted to switch from a weak mayor to a strong mayor system, but such efforts were unsuccessful when put to a vote.

City of Miami, Florida

In August of 2018, the Miami City Commission approved an initiative to let voters decide in the November 2018 midterm election whether to change the city charter and replace the city manager system for a strong mayor form of government. The issue of creating a stronger mayor system was brought to the city commission by the collection of 20,000 petition signatures which called for a strong mayor form of government.³⁵ Under the proposed amendment, the city manager would be replaced with the mayor; the mayor would serve as a non-voting, non-member commission chair; the mayor would be granted the power to appoint and remove the city attorney, city clerk, police and fire chief, department directors and employees;³⁶ and the mayor's annual compensation would increase from \$130,000 to \$187,000.³⁷ However, this referendum ultimately failed to pass in the November election, receiving 36% of the vote.³⁸

Despite this initiative failing, the mayor of the City of Miami does have more power than many mayors in a manager form of government, as the mayor has the ability to appoint the city manager. However, the city manager still serves as the city's chief executive, and their appointment is subject to approval by the city commission.

Clearwater, Florida

A similar initiative was on the ballot in Clearwater, Florida in November of 2018, which would have eliminated the city manager position and given daily authority to the mayor, who would then be removed as a member of the council body. The initiative was primarily supported by the Clearwater Downtown Partnership, which advocated for the switch in an effort to strengthen the city's vitality to match cities such as Tampa and St. Petersburg, which have strong mayor systems. Critics, meanwhile, argued that the council-manager form of government is more stable and common throughout the state, and that keeping politics out of daily city operations is necessary to keep the city operating effectively

³³ <https://www.sandiego.gov/sites/default/files/legacy/fm/annual/pdf/fy06/11v1transition.pdf>

³⁴ <https://www.sandiego.gov/city-clerk/aboutus/history>

³⁵ https://www.miamitimesonline.com/news/miami-strong-mayor-measure-on-ballot/article_cb65894e-a094-11e8-9d64-c7fbf7110552.html

³⁶ <https://thenewtropic.com/referendum-3-strong-mayor/>

³⁷ <https://www.nbcmiami.com/local/miami-voters-to-decide-on-strong-mayor-referendum/168002/>

³⁸ <https://thenewtropic.com/these-are-the-results-of-the-nov-6-midterm-election-in-miami-dade-county/>

and efficiently.³⁹ Ultimately, the initiative failed to pass, with approximately 40% of voters in favor of the initiative.⁴⁰

Columbia, South Carolina

In Columbia, South Carolina, there was a heated debate over whether to switch to a strong mayor system. There was significant public confusion regarding the switch, and the ballot initiative ultimately did not pass. Columbia currently has a strong manager/weak mayor system, where the city manager is the chief executive who is hired and fired by the city council. City employees are hired and fired by the city manager, and the city council has no authority to influence hiring and firing decisions except for that of the city manager, city attorney, and municipal judges, who are appointed by the city council. The council has, and would have maintained under the proposal, authority to put spending limits on the city manager or a strong mayor – which is currently set at a limit of \$49,999. Any spending above that amount requires a vote of council. Under the current system, the manager listens to directives on broad spending practices and submits budget recommendations. The council then tweaks the recommended budget and votes to adopt it. This system would have remained the same under the proposed changes, although the elected mayor would have been in charge of the process instead of the city manager.⁴¹

Under the current system, the mayor is part time, is paid \$17,500/year, has an expense account, and has three city employees. If the referendum were to have passed, the salary would have increased to \$160,000, as the position would have become full time.⁴² A strong mayor would have had to seek the council's permission to hire an executive administrator to help run the city, however once that office was established the council would have no control over who would be chosen for the position.⁴³

The City of Columbia's Council is structured similarly to the City of Gainesville's Commission in a 4-2-1 plan, which requires that the council be comprised of a representative from four geographic areas of town, two to represent the entire city, and a mayor elected citywide. The creation of the strong mayor system would have no impact on this, but a strong mayor would dilute the authority of council members because constituents and powerful city players would be able to go straight to the mayor to get things done instead of turning to their other representatives. The mayor could additionally play favorites with council members supporting the mayor's initiatives.

The city looked into a strong mayor system because the divided authority in the current system slows the decision-making process and makes it difficult to assign credit or blame. However, much of **the public in Columbia worried that the concentration of power in a strong mayor invites abuse of power.** Specifically, they worried that the mayor could punish a council member by slowing or stopping the projects in that member's district or by interfering with those issues.⁴⁴

³⁹ <https://www.tampabay.com/blogs/baybuzz/2018/11/05/clearwater-strong-mayor-referendum-what-you-need-to-know/>

⁴⁰ <https://www.tampabay.com/blogs/baybuzz/2018/11/05/clearwater-strong-mayor/>

⁴¹ <https://www.thestate.com/article13825283.html>

⁴² <https://www.wistv.com/story/23584815/council-approves-potential-strong-mayor-salary-on-first-reading/>

⁴³ https://www.postandcourier.com/does-columbia-really-need-a-strong-mayor/article_99a24645-fe94-5bc2-ab39-e1312205f613.html

⁴⁴ <https://www.thestate.com/article13825283.html>

Ultimately, a **lack of clarity over the extent and purpose of the switch led the public to reject the proposal** to switch to a strong mayor system, as 57% of voters voted against the initiative.⁴⁵

Dallas, Texas

In 2005, and in the years since, there has been support among the business community for a switch to a strong mayor system, however this initiative has continued to be unsuccessful with voters. While the city manager position was created in Dallas in an attempt to insulate the city executive position from political interference, downtown business leaders argue that the current form of municipal government leaves no one responsible for the interests of downtown or the city as a whole.⁴⁶

City officials who were opposed to the initiative called it a “slap in the face to minority representation” and an “attack on fairness” highlighting the debate this switch can bring about. In addition to criticisms of the strong mayor platform itself, there was an **internal scandal regarding the way the initiative was put on the ballot**, as the necessary 30,000 signatures were gathered in secrecy. The initiative was supported by a small group of local attorneys and a former mayor who advocated for the shift while in office in 2005, but decided not to run for re-election in 2007. The initiative mounted significant opposition, as it was **opposed by the entire city council, the vast majority of candidates for city council, 6 of the 7 past mayors, several area chambers of commerce, and the Dallas Citizens Council**, a shadow government made up of the city’s business elite. The **African American community strongly opposed the initiative** as well, believing that the shift would threaten the little power they were able to gain after a 1991 redistricting which gave communities of color their fair share of seats on the city council. Beyond this, opposition was **concerned that giving too much power to one person would lead to corruption**, and that the initiative would **dilute the power of individual council members**, who would never be able to get anything done in their district without appealing to the mayor.

The proposal itself would have given the mayor and the council confirmation power over appointments to commissions and boards, and would give the mayor sole appointment power over department heads such as the police and fire chiefs. The mayor would also remain part of the council, an unusual feature of strong-mayor governments.⁴⁷

The overwhelming rejection of the strong mayor proposal by Dallas voters show that they remain in favor of limiting the role of politics in the day to day operations of the city. In an effort to quell the harsh debate, the Dallas Citizens Council pressed the city council to pass a nonbinding resolution to put an alternative initiative on the November ballot, which would allow the mayor to hire the city manager, who would be fired by either the mayor or a simple majority of the city council. However, this compromise never came to fruition.⁴⁸

Switch from Strong to Weak Mayor

⁴⁵ <https://www.thestate.com/news/politics-government/article13830737.html>

⁴⁶ <https://www.governing.com/topics/mgmt/Mayor-Manager-Conundrum.html>

⁴⁷ <https://www.dmagazine.com/publications/d-magazine/2005/march/can-a-strong-mayor-save-dallas/>

⁴⁸ <https://www.texasmonthly.com/articles/whats-the-matter-with-dallas/>

While several cities have explored the shift from weak to strong mayor, the reverse has also been true.

Washougal, Washington

In late 2018, Washougal moved forward with a transition from a strong to weak mayor government structure. With this, the mayor became a regular councilmember, and the mayor pro tempore filled in as mayor through the first city council meeting, at which point the city council appointed a mayor from among its members. This mayor will play a purely symbolic role, apart from their position as the presiding officer of the council. The council additionally appointed a city manager, who fills the executive and administrative roles of the former mayor.⁴⁹

There were several reasons this change occurred, the primary one being concern that **too much power was given to an elected position who could not be removed from office**. Notably, under the strong mayor system there was no protection against a corrupt or incompetent mayor, and the lack of an impeachment mechanism meant that individual would still be in charge of the city's daily operations for the entirety of their four-year term.⁵⁰

Proponents of this change say that it **helps to prevent abuses of power by removing politics from city business**. Additionally, Washougal local elections had, for many years, experienced very **low voter turnout**, which is especially troubling when governments have power centralized in one elected official, who may have garnered support from a very small minority of city residents.⁵¹

PRELIMINARY AND ILLUSTRATIVE LIST OF POTENTIAL STAKEHOLDERS

- City Commission
- City Charter Officers
- City Staff
- Neighbors

⁴⁹ <https://www.camaspstrecord.com/news/2018/nov/22/washougal-begins-shift-to-strong-council-govt/>

⁵⁰ <https://www.clarkcountytoday.com/news/washougal-puts-forward-proposition-for-form-of-government-change/>

⁵¹ <https://www.camaspstrecord.com/news/2018/mar/29/changing-strong-mayor-might-be-good-for-cities-but-needs-public-buy-in/>