

Citizen Advisory Committees could soon be chaired by Council members

Local lawmakers have tentatively voted in favor of a move that would leave the responsibility of chairing citizen advisory committees to Council members.

Mayor Tom Mrakas said shifting the responsibility of chairing meetings to members of Council will allow for more efficiency and allow citizen members to be active in the committees without pressure of chairing the meeting.

“When meetings are chaired by a member of Council, I think we get off and running right away,” he said. “And I think it also allows the citizen members to do what they sign up for, which is to actually be very active within the items instead of having to worry about chairing the meeting.”

Ward 2 Councillor Rachel Gilliland said she was in support of the motion and observed similar concerns.

“I did find that at times,” she said. “Some of the citizen members might have been a little bit apprehensive having been in that situation and, again, I think the idea is that it is about the citizen members’ feedback and we’re there to direct the flow of the meeting and be there to listen and recommend that feedback to council as well.”

Following the suggestion by Ward 5 Councillor John Gallo that the door should still be open for members of a committee that want to take on chairing responsibilities, Mayor Mrakas said he didn’t believe that the amendment would prevent a citizen member from being vice-chair, giving them the opportunity to learn procedure from a Council member.

“So, I think that it’s still a good opportunity for the citizen members. Speaking as you said, as if there’s someone there that might excel at it, that’s maybe an opportunity for them to do something beyond just being one of the members of the committee,” Mayor Mrakas said.

Ward 6 Councillor Harold Kim also said he is in favor of the amendment now that he is assured that Council members will have the opportunity to vice-chair a meeting. He agreed that the first few committee meetings were “clunky” and that this will be an opportunity for committees to have a smoother transition.

“Our role has always been to listen, provide guidance in the background and allow citizens to take leadership, take ownership of the committee, and I thought that having a Council chair might prevent that, from a subliminal perspective or subconscious perspective,” Councillor Kim said. “But, upon reflection, I don’t think that’s the case? I think having that vice chair does allow for that opening to have that citizen vice chair hitting the ground running without the clunky transition.”

Ward 4 Councillor Michael Thompson said he was also in support. He clarified that the Heritage Advisory Committee will also be included in the amendment and that it would be helpful for a member of Council to help facilitate discussion and engagement by guiding the meeting.

Councillor Kim proposed another amendment that changes the duration of the term per citizen member for a maximum of two years on committee instead of four years.

He said it’s always been his objective to have new citizens be engaged, something that isn’t accelerating at the rate he had hoped for, and that this amendment will encourage more people to participate in committees who may have been intimidated by the four-year term.

The amendment of the term duration will not deter current advisory committee members from being reelected and serving again, he said, but at least there will be a window for those who are interested in getting involved for a shorter term.

The term for Council members serving on Advisory Committees was recently changed to two years to add diversification and change of experience, Councillor Kim said, adding that it makes sense to put the committee members on the same cycle.

'I'm finding that the best success that we have engaging residents into our community is through the involvement in our Advisory Committees,' he said.

First to speak against the matter was Councillor Gilliland who said that while she is not completely opposed to the idea, she's concerned that the shortened duration will not allow some committees that meet only every two months to feel like they're making a difference with only two years to serve.

In the circumstance when there is a new advisory board every two years, this could set the committee behind because of the learning curve of new members adjusting to guidelines. While she said she is not against the idea, Councillor Gilliland questioned whether it was the best way to build up citizen engagement.

In support of the amendment to shorten the duration of serving on committee was Councillor Thompson who said that over the years they have received many different applicants and there is disappointment that they don't get an opportunity to serve.

'It's always great to see that there are so many people willing to put their name forward and be part of the advisory committees, and it would be great if there were more opportunities for them to be able to get involved. So, for that reason alone, I'm happy to support the motion,' Councillor Thompson said, adding that it will be interesting to see if more applicants come forward as a result of this motion.

Mayor Mrakas said the amendment may create a 'halfway point' for those interested in getting involved in the committee so they don't need to wait until the end of the election.

'And instead of waiting, they have an opportunity to put their name [forward]. And I can tell you numerous times that people have come to me and sat down with me in my office, and they wanted to get involved in the Town,' Mayor Mrakas said. 'I said, 'Well, you have to wait till after the election.'

'And so this provides that that halfway point, or maybe some new people can get involved and be part of the Town, part of our communities, part of helping make our community how great it is.'

By Elisa Nguyen