Portland Commission Government

By Carl Abbott

Portland's commission form of municipal government, which the city adopted as a progressive innovation in 1913, is a rarity and relic in the twenty-first century. Despite Portland's reputation for innovation in other realms, voters for more than a century have stubbornly stuck with the basic structure in which a small set of elected officials serve simultaneously as the executives of city bureaus and as the city's legislative body.

Portland voters opted for a commission government at a time of rapid growth (especially after 1905) and criticism of city government. The mayor-council system was vulnerable to corruption and inefficiency, and the administration of Harry Lane (1905-1909) had demonstrated that electing a reform-minded mayor was not a solution. An entrenched city council consistently could block the mayor's initiatives.

In 1912, during Allen G. Rushlight's mayoral term (1911-1913), the Portland Vice Commission reported that four hundred downtown hotels and apartment buildings were involved in illicit sexual activity. The next year, the New York Bureau of Municipal Research—invited to Portland by leading businessmen, including *Oregon Journal* publisher Sam Jackson—offered a detailed and devastating critique of Portland's operating departments in local government. Several competing reform proposals surfaced, to be winnowed to the option favored by the civic-minded business community.

A new charter mandating a commission government passed in May 1913 by a scant margin of 292 votes out of 34,342 cast. Opposition came from the local Republican Party machine, which had benefitted from the status quo. Support came from Roosevelt Progressives, downtown businesses, and the middle class of homeowners, small businessmen, professionals, and skilled workers in the new neighborhoods on the city's east side.

Commission government blends legislative and executive functions. Voters choose a mayor and four commissioners to serve four-year terms (the commissioner terms are staggered). Elections are nonpartisan and citywide, with all five commissioners (the mayor is considered the fifth commissioner) representing the city as a whole. Sitting together, the five commissioners form the City Council enact ordinances and serve as the legislative decision-making body. Each of the five is the chief executive of a set of city operating departments and bureaus, such as parks, police, and transportation. Voters also elect an independent city auditor, an office that has become increasingly active as a watchdog.

The commission form of government was devised in Galveston, Texas, after that city's devastating 1900 hurricane. The idea was to allow voters to choose experienced business and professional people who could run city affairs more efficiently than political hacks. As the system has evolved in Portland, the mayor and commissioners confine themselves to questions of policy and rely on professional administrators to oversee most operations.

A frequent complaint about the system is that the division of bureaus among the five commissioners leads to turf wars and horse-trading that can override a uniform vision or policy for the city. This problem is obviated to some degree by the authority of the mayor to define and propose the annual budget and to control the assignment of bureaus.

A second criticism is that citywide elections, with no council districts, tilt the playing field toward well-connected members of the civic-commercial leadership community who have the ability to raise campaign funds, thereby stifling the voices of minorities and poorer neighborhoods. Since 1914, when the first mayor and commissioners took office, only two African American men and eight white women have been elected as city commissioners.

Three women have served as mayor since 1913 (out of fifteen total)—Dorothy McCullough Lee (1949-1952), Connie McCready (1979-1980), and Vera Katz (1993-2004). (Lee and McCready are also counted among the eight female commissioners.) Geographic concentration is variable. For example, four of five City Council members in 2017 lived on the west side of the Willamette River, but in the mid-1970s, four of five lived in the well-to-do Irvington-Alameda-Grant Park

neighborhoods in northeast Portland.

Repeated efforts to get rid of commission government in Portland have failed. In 1950, an attempt to shift to a council-manager system, backed by Mayor Lee, failed to make the ballot. In 1958, voters rejected council-manager government by a relatively narrow 6 percent margin. Voters in 1966 crushed a proposal for a strong mayor-council system (62-38 percent) and, in 1974, soundly rejected a plan to consolidate Portland, Multnomah County, and east county suburbs into a single municipality. A proposal for a strong mayor system with an expanded city council elected by districts failed at the polls in 2002, as did a 2007 proposal to centralize administrative authority in a strong mayor and limit the four commissioners to legislative duties.

Portland is the last large city in the United States to retain the commission form of government. Voters see a municipality that works reasonably well and that offers multiple points for citizen input. Portland voters may decide that their commission system requires fixing, but that time has not yet come.

Sources

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