

PDX Forward: City of Portland Charter Review Process Explained

Bureau Assignments

With the City of Portland Charter Review under way, Portland Forward is issuing a series of brief articles on topics that Portlanders should consider as this process unfolds, and the Charter Commission engages with the community. This piece covers the topic of bureau assignments.

Portland utilizes a commission form of government which allows the mayor to assign city bureaus to themselves and other members of the City Council—Portland’s city commissioners. Portland has 26 city bureaus that are assigned to these commissioners. These include bureaus such as the Police, Fire and Rescue, Bureau of Emergency Management, Water Bureau, Bureau of Transportation, Housing Bureau, the Bureau of Development Services, the Bureau of Planning and Sustainability, and Parks and Recreation.

These bureaus have significantly different budgets and oversee vastly different operations. This means that overseeing larger-budget bureaus that typically conduct more readily apparent city business, such as the Police Bureau, can provide a commissioner with greater opportunity to influence more of the city’s spending and associated activities. For this reason, commissioners often want to oversee larger, or more influential bureaus. Even when, as has happened over the past year, there are calls by citizens or even other Council members for bureaus to be reassigned due to perceptions of mismanagement, it is ultimately only the mayor who can make that decision. This leaves citizens with few action steps if they disagree with the mayor’s decisions on how bureaus are allocated.

The mayor’s unique ability to assign or reassign bureaus to themselves and other Council members is one of their greatest authorities. As part of their power, the mayor may make these assignments for any reason, as well as change them at any time, without need for justification. Without checks, it is possible for this power to be “used as a bargaining or punitive tool,” as the City Club of Portland noted in their 2019 report: “New Government for Today’s Portland: Rethinking 100 Years of the Commission System.”¹

While all candidates run on various platforms and enter office with ideas about what they would like to achieve politically, their bureau assignments may have little to no alignment with their goals. In some commission-style government systems candidates can run for commission seats, however, Portland’s commissioners must be appointed by the mayor. While the mayor may take a Council member’s hopes for bureau assignment into account and is likely to consider their particular strengths, ultimately, bureau assignments are made based on the mayor’s impressions of the best fit for each commissioner balanced against their own desires and political agenda. Further, with only a 5-person council, it is unlikely that individuals with skills or executive experience in all of the bureau areas will have a seat on council. This positions the city to have Council members representing bureaus which don’t necessarily align with either their interest areas or their expertise.

Recent commissioner Chloe Eudaly exemplifies the mismatch that this system can create. Commissioner Eudaly ran on a platform focused heavily on affordable housing—a position that resonated with many voters. After winning her election, however, she was not assigned to lead the Housing Bureau. While Commissioner Eudaly nevertheless made housing a major focus of her time on Council, without assignment to the housing bureau itself, she had to work from outside of the bureau to make change happen. Further, her assignments to other bureaus demanded significant attention, which reduced the amount of time available to her to focus on this major platform issue that she ran on, and which voters signaled they wanted her to work toward by electing her.

Regardless of their nature and best intent, once assigned to particular bureaus, a commissioner’s focus has to be more exclusively dedicated to overseeing their bureaus, rather than considering the needs of the city as a whole—as council members within other city governmental structures are able to do. Former Council Member Steve Novick wrote in a 2017 Willamette Week article, “As soon as you assign bureaus to a commissioner, two things happen: Those bureaus become incredibly important to that commissioner, and everything else the city does becomes relatively unimportant.

¹<https://drive.google.com/file/d/1y74WRaWJA3j2QEYqsA0tZwcLOvT97VcZ/view>

Suddenly, each commissioner's primary constituents are the people in the city who care most about that bureau, and its employees—and nobody wants to bring bad news to their primary constituents.”²

The pain points of the current bureau assignments, clearly, are significant. Even under the best of circumstances, this system of mayoral assignment lends itself to many potential issues, which all become even more compounded as Councils turn over across election cycles, and bureaus by necessity are reassigned to new commissioners who may bring entirely different priorities, skills, and leadership styles, leaving the bureaus without consistent management.

We at Portland Forward are asking ourselves how this system is serving our city, and how it could be improved. Some of the questions we're asking include:

- Are there any advantages to mayoral bureau assignment that suggest this practice should be kept in place?
- Are there certain bureaus that the mayor should be required to oversee or to assign to other Council Members?
- Would another form of Council management alleviate some of these issues? If so, what would that look like?
- In any Council structure, how can we create better alignment between the issues voters and candidates believe candidates will be able to work toward and the opportunities available to these officials once in office?

²<https://www.wweek.com/news/city/2017/03/29/steve-novick-was-kicked-out-of-portland-city-hall-now-he-offers-his-boldest-ideas-to-shake-up-a-broken-council/>