

City council/Mayor Forum, January 16th, 2011

Program: Reception: Doris Ayyoub

Welcome: Cynthia Garrick, YCLWV President

Introductions: Mary Crago, VP for Programs

MC: Becky Scholl

Lunch: Kitty Jubran, Jackie Call, Karen Pilon, Vickie Whiteman

Panel: Ben Shoval, real estate developer and “Strong Mayor” advocate and donor

Mary Place, former council member and former mayor.

Wes Crago, City Executive, Ephrata, Washington

Each panel member was given fifteen (15) minutes to introduce his/her position on the question “Shall the current City Council/City Administrator system of governance be replaced by a 'Strong Mayor'/City Administrator system in which a Mayor is elected directly by the city residents.

Ben Shoval: The question is how do you feel about the issue. Do you want to replace the current system with a new one or retain the status quo. Where is the problem? Are you unhappy with the current system? Opinion: A strong mayor elected directly by the voters will have a positive effect on crime (gang violence) and infrastructure (eg. potholes.)

Mary Place: Proposition 1 up before the voters was “rushed out” of the council without a public review of the actual language of the charter revision. For example, Article II, Section 5, does not give the City Council access to the city staff which will necessitate the Council hiring additional staff at an additional expense for the city.

The Mayor hires with the Council's approval but he/she fires on his/her own, decides the duties of Boards and Commissions and can remove members of those bodies on his/her own. He/She is responsible for all laws by which “law and order” are maintained, brings legislation to the Council which means there is no “separation of powers,” can adopt measures as he/she sees fit. A super majority of five (5) is required to override a mayor's legislative proposal. Through an elected mayor, political pressure can enter into actions and policies of the city in, for example, land use and the awarding of contracts.

Yakima has an annual budget of 200 million; on average 2000 checks are issued by the city per month. Yet it is proposed that an elected mayor could “hold another job.”

Article VI, in Ms. Place's opinion outlines an “unworkable system.” What would be the mayor's qualifications as compared to those of a professionally trained manager? His/Her attendance requirement for council meetings is lax. He/She could miss a full two months of meetings. He/She can remove and replace departments. He/She has to negotiate with thirteen (13) city unions. His accountability will be to fund-raisers not to the city or its citizens.

The current council system has produced good mayors who have done well in crises: Betty Edmonson, Henry Beauchamp, Pat Burndt, Clarence Barnett.

The current council design is a “corporate” model of Board of Directors and Management. A “strong major” design introduces “politics” in the management of a \$200 million dollar budget. It is a design which will cost money and be less efficient.

Wes Crago: Mr. Crago compared the two forms of governance. His position on the issue is based on his background both as a city councilman in a Council/Manager format (formerly in Ephrata) and as a city administrator in an elected Mayor format (currently in Ephrata). He qualified his personal preference for the elected Mayor format by saying that his experience in Ephrata government determines his opinion. He qualified all of his statements with the generalization that WHO is elected in either format is more important to the success of city government than the form of government selected. The particular character of a city (eg. its population, economic base, size) and the PERSONS ELECTED are the most important considerations in the success of city governance. He urged those in the audience to stay involved in the issue and in the workings of the city regardless of the outcome of the special election before us. The differences in the model of governance do not affect the cost of governance. Whether the change is expensive or cost neutral depends on other factors than the form of city governance. *(Mr. Crago's two page summary of arguments for and against the two forms of governance is available from the League office.)*

Written questions from the audience were sorted and presented by Becky Scholl who also reminded the body that the League standard is “civil discourse” in a public forum.

Many questions referred to the signs distributed throughout the city which claim that a “strong major” choice will affect crime and taxes. Ben Shoval's response was that typically a “strong,” elected major will focus on crime and that he/she will spend more on policing and less on community programs that address crime through community interaction.

Mary Place responded that the state budget affects crime and criminal sentencing.

Some questioners asked “who is behind” the proposition. Who wrote the proposition to amend the city charter? Who contributed to the campaign?

Mary Place reminded the group of the recent WalMart controversy. In her opinion, the “strong mayor” proposition is backed by “land developers” and hands decision making power to one person: the mayor. And despite complaints of delays in local decision making regarding land use by contractors, “land use is controlled by state government regulations.”

Ben Shoval suggested that some who criticize the proposal have “an ax to grind.” The proposal was prepared by a committee of city council members; a draft of the proposal was reviewed by the city's attorney and given two public hearings.

Mary Place challenged the statement that the review given the proposal qualified as a public hearing. The only public hearings were on the question of whether to create a proposal for a public vote. The proposal language itself was not given a public review.

The two panelists did not agree on the issue of the cost of the change. They did not agree on the question of the efficiency of the two forms of city governance.

Wes Crago reminded the body that the efficiency of either form of governance depends entirely on the quality of leadership in the elected officials. He reminded the audience again that the quality of leaders depends entirely on the continuing involvement of citizens in their local government.