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City Council

1. What is the role of Councilors?

Councilors are elected to be the city's legislators or lawmakers. Together, Councilors constitute the legislative body known as the City Council, which has the authority to make local laws.¹ Some of the Council's responsibilities include: creating bureaus and departments, adopting city codes, setting salaries, approving the city's budget, and applying quasi-judicial authority to laws and policies.² In addition, Councilors will meet with their constituents.

2. What significant changes will we see in Councilors' roles?

Effective January 1, 2025, Councilors will no longer directly oversee City bureaus. Instead, they will focus on setting policies³ to achieve desired community outcomes. To that end, the Council will convene public meetings, gather input from constituents and others, debate, evaluate policy choices, and adopt laws to reflect these choices.

3. Since each Council member represents their own district, how will we achieve a vision for the future of Portland and representation of the City as a whole?

The Mayor is elected city-wide to be the chief executive officer of the City. The Mayor has executive power to execute the laws adopted by City Council, to

¹ Portland Transition, Frequently Asked Questions: Council's New Roles & Responsibilities accessed 3/4/24 <https://www.portland.gov/vote/questions/roles-and-responsibilities>

² "Quasi-Judicial" is defined as a proceeding or decision-making process by officials based on a record of evidence and facts presented. While it is similar to a court proceeding, the decision makers are administrative officials, not law judges. Quasi-judicial action may be appealed to a court of law. In practice, very few quasi-judicial matters appear on the Council agenda. See Glossary, Changing Roles: City Council.

³ A "policy" is defined as a law, regulation, procedure, administrative action, incentive, or voluntary practice of governments and other institutions. Policy decisions are frequently reflected in the allocation of resources through the City budget. See Glossary, Changing Roles: City Council.

administer the bureaus, employees, and facilities of the City, and to ensure that the City is using budgeted funds appropriately.⁴ In addition, the Mayor is charged with encouraging programs for the physical, economic, social, and cultural development of the City, and to promote the economic development of the City. Finally, the Mayor serves as ceremonial head of the City.⁵

4. What will City Councilors do when they are no longer supervising City Bureaus?

City Council members set policy and enact ordinances. They have the power to make appropriations and raise revenue by approving the city budget. City Council also has a role in building intergovernmental relationships, collaboration, and communication with other local, state, and federal jurisdictions.⁶

In a system with deliberate checks and balances, City Council will collaborate with the Mayor to create performance expectations of the City Administration services and bureaus as well as maintain legislative oversight.⁷ Councilors will exercise quasi-judicial power to apply to laws and policies. Note: quasi-judicial authority means the power to apply laws and policies to a set of circumstances such as land use.

5. What are the duties of the Council President?

At its first meeting each calendar year, the Council elects a President and Vice President by majority vote of those present. The President presides over Council meetings, works with the City Auditor to finalize meeting agendas, assigns submitted items to Council committees or to the Council as a whole, assigns seats in Council chambers, and signs items approved by Council when necessary.⁸

⁴ Glossary, Changing Roles: City Council.

<https://docs.google.com/document/d/16t3m2Bv2q7TJk5YpylksKT81eCkOwD-A0cQRpFQtsdk/edit>

⁵ Portland City Charter, Section 2-401.

⁶ Charter Commission Final report, 2022 P15

⁷ Charter Commission Final report, 2022 P17

⁸ Frequently Asked Questions: Future City Council:

<https://www.portland.gov/transition/advisory/questions/future-city-council>

6. How will the 12-member Council conduct City business efficiently and make prompt decisions?

Work is currently underway to establish the processes by which the Council will conduct business. The Charter provides that the Council can transact business only if a quorum is present.⁹ A quorum is seven members or a simple majority of the Council. The Mayor has a tie-breaking vote on legislation. Non-emergency ordinance policies can be passed if six councilors plus the Mayor vote in the affirmative. A handful of uncommon, but high-consequence actions require a vote of at least nine councilors to move forward.¹⁰

The Council establishes its own rules of procedure. It can organize itself to do committee work, with subgroups of council members specializing in different policy areas.¹¹ As of April 1, 2024, planning is underway for Council Standing Committees which focus on specific issues such as:

- Government Performance & Finance
- Public Health & Public Safety
- Transportation and Infrastructure
- Community Development
- Sustainability & Climate
- Housing & Homelessness.

7. With 3 Councilors representing my district, who should I contact if I have a problem?

Given the size of our City, no single Counselor could be an expert on all the issues at hand. With three council members in a district, each can focus on specific concerns. A staff member could direct you to the appropriate councilor.¹² In addition, since the Mayor, through the City Administrator, supervises all City business, the Mayor's staff could direct you to the appropriate department(s) to address your concern.

⁹ Portland City Charter, Section 2-114.

¹⁰ Portland City Charter Section 2-120. Charter Commission 2022 Final report P15.

¹¹ Charter Commission 2022 Final report P15.

¹² **Melanie Q and A.**

8. Does the top vote-getter in each district have more power than the other Councilors?

Under the Charter, each of the three councilors in a district has equal power unless they are elected to the position of President of the Council, Vice President, or chair of a particular committee of the Council.

9. How can Portland residents hold members of City Council accountable?

Council elections are held in the November general election, when voter turnout is consistently higher. That means more voices weigh in on decisions affecting all Portlanders. Recent election turnouts show that as little as one-quarter to one-half fewer Portland voters turn out in May compared to November. The increased turnout in November elections tends to come from younger, more racially diverse voters as well.¹³

Generally, Councilors will serve 4-year terms.¹⁴ Councilors from District No. 1, and No. 2 and the Mayor, face voters during presidential elections. Councilors from District No. 3, and No. 4 and the Auditor are elected during midterm elections.¹⁵

10. What staffing and office space is planned for the 12-member Council?

Each Councilor will have at least 1 dedicated senior staff, and the Council as a whole will have a committee operations and legislative support group. In addition, Councilors of each district will share an Admin Specialist as well as a council administrator with a district administration for each of the 4 districts.¹⁶

¹³ Charter Commission Final report, 2022 P 10

¹⁴ In the November 2024 election, representatives of District #3 and #4 are elected for an initial term of two years. Thereafter, those elected to office will serve for four years. See Portland City Charter section 3-101.

¹⁵ Portland Transition website,

<https://www.portland.gov/transition/advisory/questions/city-council-elections> accessed 3/4/24

¹⁶ City of Portland Transition Council Approved Organizational Charts Nov 2, 2023:

<https://www.portland.gov/transition/government/city-organization#toc-council-and-mayoral-staffing->

Renovations are being made to City Hall to accommodate the new government, including updates to Council Chambers, Council City Hall offices, Mayor and City Administrator offices, funded in the 23-24 budget at \$7.2 million from Portland Building Major Maintenance Reserves.¹⁷

The Charter Commission envisioned that an office located in each district would improve access and engagement by constituents. The decision to bring that to reality may be left to the new City Council.¹⁸

11. How will we recruit enough serious, competent candidates to run for each of these 12 seats?

Shifting the City Council from all at-large seats to district seats helps address the significant financial barrier to running for office city-wide. The cost of campaigning is less, because candidates focus on a smaller constituency. The current system of at-large elections gives an outsized advantage to financially resourced and politically well-connected candidates. Multi-winner districts increase opportunities for historically underrepresented communities to elect their candidates of choice. Voters can expect to see more candidates that are renters, younger residents, BIPOC and members of minor parties.¹⁹

12. What qualities and skills should I be looking for as I choose who to support to represent my district?

The website of League of Women Voters of Portland has excellent guidance on how to judge a candidate in 7 steps.²⁰

In addition, we believe the following qualities and skills will most benefit representatives of districts under the amended Charter:

- LISTEN to constituents and other elected representatives, government staff and experts

¹⁷ <https://www.portland.gov/transition/government/facilities>

¹⁸ City Council Resolution 37638 Directs the Office of Management and Finance on the plan to accommodate the physical space needs of the new Mayor, City Administrator, and twelve-member City Council. Adopted November 29, 2023.

¹⁹ Charter Commission Final report, 2022, page 12.

²⁰ How to Judge a Candidate: <https://www.lwv.org/blog/how-judge-candidate>

- BE PREPARED coming to each meeting and decision having carefully reviewed the issues
- COLLABORATE with others
- COOPERATE with others
- PERSUADE others
- CONTEMPLATE best steps forward in creating a new city government
- WORK HARD!