

Extra

Objections to Standing Committees vs. Committee of the Whole

1. In all humility, I am only one of nine on this Council. We are part-time decision-makers, elected from different walks of life and most of us hold full-time jobs. We are not full-time staff, and I am not eager to take on a prescribed and segmented workload described in this standing committee resolution. Defining specific responsibilities of committees does a disservice to the work styles of individual councilmembers whose responsibility it is to be well informed before making decisions. As an at-large council representative, I have always viewed my work as more outward looking, into the community and connecting with constituents. This change in process is inward-looking toward departments and staff. I have little interest in taking on supervision of staff, conducting extra meetings or hearings as a designated liason, or serving as a specialist to take up work best done by full-time staff or expert stakeholders. I rely on those professionals and their expert counsel and information to cast educated votes, and I connect with them as needed to address the concerns of constituents.
2. As the internal work sessions painfully revealed, city staff, whose ~~job~~ it is to do the daily work providing city services, advising petitioners, executing policy and ordinances, were not consulted in the design of this change in operating procedure. Caught totally off-guard, they were entitled to their concerns and their very good questions about the unintended consequences of this change from council being generalists to becoming specialists. At the very least, this proposal needs much more time to develop with our partners in city government at the table to help in its design. Furthermore, what has been the public engagement, the outreach to constituents who may also have opinions and concerns about this process change?
3. I, as a duly elected council representative, do not wish to be **pigeon-holed into a specialist category**. **I wish to remain a generalist** where I have the opportunity in a Committee of the Whole to hear all the evidence presented in real time and use my own independent means to seek clarification or additional information before casting educated votes in regular sessions. Relying on the cursory reports and recommendations from only 4 of my peers does a disservice to the complete review that I find necessary, not only for myself, but for the constituents I represent. With regard to reporting and record-keeping, who takes these "robust minutes" and how can they possibly substitute for my own notes and my own listening skills that I bring to each and every Committee of the Whole? As to councilmembers self-selecting into specialized committees of primary interest, I would suggest that every single piece of business and legislation that comes before this representative body should be of prime interest to all nine of us.
4. We do not have to break up into segmented and focused committees in order to achieve more discipline and time savings. We have the ability to do that now with simple behavior changes. It isn't hard to be concise, just takes a modicum of discipline to resist the temptation to speak at length when a simple statement relative to the facts will suffice. If timers are required to limit the debates and public comment, then let's try that first before throwing out the entire system.
5. Little time will be saved by this new system, and my fear is it will cause the opposite. Any good stage manager running an efficient production will tell you that a grouping of serial meetings that require hard stops, transition times, and an estimation of start times for public notice will

take longer than a seamless production with no stage waits. Serial standing committees will only add more bureaucratic layers, duplication of efforts, and will cause more work for staff and councilmembers alike. A Committee of the Whole where agenda items are introduced and dispatched one right after the other will guarantee a shorter meeting where councilmembers, petitioners, staff and the public can finish business and get home in a timely manner.

Most council meetings do NOT go into the wee small hours, and in any meeting with multiple agenda items, someone will have to go last. On nights where there is much business, we must accept the reality that the night will go long. Traffic controlling the order of business is the responsibility of council leadership coordinating with staff. That job can be done by organizing meetings that will end as quickly as possible and with adequate discussion time to hash out the details for full accountability. If more time is needed for thorough vetting, that can certainly be extended, postponed or tabled once a matter reaches a regular or special session. If we have too much work to consider, that too is a function of council leadership collaborating with the administration to take a look at the legislative load and decide how it can be more appropriately managed to ensure it is completed in due time, by statutory deadlines and with all careful consideration. If there is too much legislative work for a part-time council, let's look at cutting some of it down or pacing it more evenly.

6. Much has been said about the need for checks and balances, for council oversight of executive function and investigation into problems or wrongdoing. Council already has important fiscal oversight duties through scrutiny and approval of the budget. I suspect that this additional push for more oversight and supervision is overstepping Council's jurisdictional bounds. There is little need for this over-reach into the Executive branch's responsibility to manage administrative staff or do more prescribed liaison work. For a significant change in operational procedure to be initiated, I would think leadership would want a full consensus that this is a wise idea, not just a simple majority. I would think that leadership would also want a full consensus from the administration and its hard-working staff members that this change will assist their work and do no harm to their already intense professional workloads. I do not see this to be the case with serious reservations continuing to be expressed by staff and several of us on this council. Without complete buy-in, and constituent outreach this change in procedure promises to be divisive and unsettling.
7. In closing, I would respectfully ask the newly elected members of this Council to consider this proposal in the wake of strong opposition. We are in the opening months of a new term, a first year of legislative work and decision-making with 4 brand new members. One year. I would ask these new members to give it at least one full year before changing the general order. Please spend this first legislative year getting acquainted with the various cycles and established running order of the Committee of the Whole. Learn about where the challenges are, pay attention and see for yourselves what can be simply and efficiently handled with some basic Council homework and due diligence. If at the end of your first year serving on this Council you see the burning need to completely change the system, then feel free to ask for a return to this debate. I ask you to please vote no on Standing Committees at the start of this new year.