

COMMUNITY VOICE

Manager Vs. Mayor: For Maui, The Better Choice Is Clear

The time is ripe and the needs are extensive to move to a local government led by a professional manager.

ABOUT 8 HOURS AGO • By Mark Hyde 

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The people of Maui have been looking to improve local government performance by amending the county charter to provide for a professional manager hired by the county council to assume responsibility for day-to-day operations (planning, waste management, public works, water, parks, etc.) in place of the current system, which places responsibility for operations in the hands of an elected mayor.

The Maui County Charter was adopted in the late 1960s when its population was less than 40,000 and the economy was largely agrarian. Today the county has a thriving tourist industry, a population over 165,000 and a budget that is roughly \$700 million.

Times have changed, and the demands on government, as well as the complexity of needs and responsibilities, have increased exponentially — but governance structure has not. It's time for change.



Special committee members discuss options related to transitioning Maui from a strong-mayor government to one featuring a county manager instead.

There are multiple problems with the current system:

1. The criteria for selecting the county's chief operating officer — a mayor — are minimal and unrelated to the work to be done. An elected mayor need only be at least 18 years of age, able to vote and have lived in the county for at least a year. People who are good at getting elected may have strong political skills, but the job demands management knowledge and experience.
2. The managing director appointed by the mayor is a political appointee. We've been vividly reminded of this by a recent article in the Maui News quoting the current managing director saying he is political, that his major job objective is getting the mayor re-elected, not serving the county and the people as primary "customers."

3. The current mayor, who is inexperienced in management, has made several inappropriate appointments to director-level positions — some with absolutely no education, background, training or experience in the areas they supposed to direct.
4. Under the current charter, all directors (except a few appointed by commissions) must resign with each new mayoral term. This creates forced, unnecessary and simultaneous turnover of nearly all executive branch key personnel, resulting in loss of knowledge, often change of direction, and inability to recruit and retain quality directors. The jobs are instead politicized to the detriment of the people's business.
5. The relationship between the mayor and council is broken. They have no working relationship. This was made the worse about a year ago when the mayor went to the trouble of writing and having published in local media an article in which he engaged in name-calling, labeling two council members "Snollygosters." It is well known that name-calling is not an effective leadership technique and that people who work together as a team accomplish more than those who do not.
6. The County's planning function is horribly broken, yet the ability to plan and implement are key success factors for any community. Maui's general plan took 10 years longer than designed and the county community plans are all about 20 years old when they are supposed to be amended every 10 years. And no one is doing anything to address needed change in process.
7. Even basic reports required by the county charter to be presented by the executive branch to the council have been ignored with no consequences or accountability. While some say the ballot box is where accountability occurs, there is none in a mayor's second term because he or she cannot stand for election after two terms. Additionally, with few ways to measure mayoral performance, elections typically turn on name recognition and incumbency rather than on real assessment of performance in office measured against explicit goals.

With this in mind, in 2010 the county adopted a Countywide Policy Plan which called for "good government" that is transparent and accountable and for exploration of other local governance options.

The County's planning

This was followed in 2012 by a

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Charter Commission, which called for creation of a committee to explore the singular issue of council-manager government.

With county government struggling on many levels, citizens petitioned the county council for creation of such a special committee. In late 2015 the council created a special committee on governance, populated it with 11 “esteemed” citizens from every region of the county, and directed it to explore whether “county-manager” government should replace the current “strong mayor” system.

By report in early May 2016, the special committee made such a recommendation, one which includes retention of an elected mayor with veto power, but gives power and responsibility for operations to a professional manager hired by the council

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The County Council received the special committee’s report last Friday, and hopefully will now act to place the matter on the November ballot so citizens for whom government exists can decide whether to amend the charter to bring about this much-needed change.

Those interested in this change effort can get more information at forthegoodofmaui.org.

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About the Author

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government structure to a council/manager form.

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