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Panel backs putting government system to vote

May 10, 2016

By COLLEEN UECHI - Staff Writer (cuechi@mauinews.com) , The Maui News

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After five months of deliberations, the Special Committee on County Governance recommended Monday that a new form of county government be placed on the ballot in November, though members remained deeply split in their support of a change.

In their final meeting, members voted 6-3 to approve a resolution that would amend the charter and create a council-manager system of government that includes an elected mayor. The matter will now go to the Maui County Council, which will decide whether to put a proposed charter amendment on the ballot.

Vice Chairwoman Madge Schaefer and members Jonathan Starr, Ray Phillips, Tamara Paltin, Kimo Haynes and Kehau Filimoeatu voted in favor of the resolution. Chairman Tony Takitani and members Paula Friel and Pua Canto opposed it. Members Kay Okamoto and Dave DeLeon, who have opposed the council-manager system in the past, were excused.

Article Photos



Schaefer



The structure supported by the committee would include a council, an elected mayor and a county manager. While the mayor would continue to serve as the face and voice of the county, have veto power and nominate members of boards, committees and

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commissions, many current duties would be transferred to the manager, including preparing the annual budget. The mayor's term would still be four years.

The manager would be appointed by the council and oversee the county's daily operations. Instead of the mayor, the manager would be in charge of implementing county policy and appointing and removing department heads. The manager position would have no term limit.

Other options considered by the committee included a council-manager system where the mayor sits on the council, as well as a council-manager system without a mayor.

A handful of residents at the meeting supported the recommended structure and said they wanted to see it put in the hands of voters.

Testifier Paul Janes-Brown said that the committee had "come up with a plan that I think really is excellent."

"The choices that you've given offer the council the opportunity to make a real clear decision about how the future of our community is going to be governed," he said.

Trinette Furtado, a candidate for Maui County Council, said that while she would prefer to have no mayor, "many people are accustomed" to having one. She agreed with the committee's recommendation for a council-manager system with an elected mayor.

"It's very much like the system we seem to have now," Furtado said. "I support this because I am disappointed in our current structure and the practice of appointing people based on our relationships."

The committee has been narrowly divided over the issue. On March 31, the full panel voted 6-5 to pursue some form of county manager government. On April 30, members voted 6-4 to recommend a council-manager form with an elected mayor.

Takitani and Schaefer have leaned heavily on opposite ends of the issue.

"I think it's a really bad idea. It takes power from the people," Takitani said after the meeting. "We don't get to select the person that is running government on Maui. It is given away . . . to nine individuals."

A council-appointed county manager would "not be accountable to the people," and neither would the department heads he or she would appoint, Takitani said. Even though residents would still elect a mayor in the recommended system, the mayor would just be a figurehead, he added.

"The mayor will have no real power to run the county," he said.

Schaefer said that the recommended system "isn't really much of a dramatic change."

"It's the operating side that gets switched," she said. "The mayor still has veto power. The mayor still has emergency powers."

Schaefer said that a county manager, who would be vetted by a recruiting firm, would bring more professionalism to the executive branch. The mayor could focus on representing the county, she added.

"To expect a charismatic person elected mayor to have the ability to run a huge corporation is ridiculous," Schaefer said. "Let the mayor do what he or she does best. Be the voice, be the diplomat."

The committee, established by the Maui County Council in December, was given a June 1 deadline to provide a recommendation to the council.

Troy Hashimoto, executive assistant for Council Chairman Mike White, said that the council expects to receive the committee's report by May 27 and have it referred to a council committee by June 3. Council Member Mike Victorino, who chairs the Policy and Intergovernmental Affairs Committee that handles charter amendments, will then decide when to hear the matter.

"For this measure to be considered on the ballot, it must be passed out of both the committee and council by the beginning of August to allow for preparations for the general election ballot," Hashimoto

explained.

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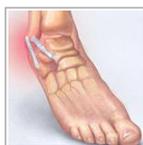
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