



Town of Mount Carmel Analysis of Mayoral Terms of Office

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Introduction

MTAS was asked to weigh in on the possibility of Mount Carmel changing the term of the mayoral office from the current 4 years to 2 years. Before we discuss the “pros and cons” of such a change, here are a couple of important items to note.

First, the Town of Mount Carmel operates under the General Law Mayor-Aldermanic Charter.

- There is no option in the charter for moving only the mayor’s office to a two-year term.
- In order to do so the offices of the entire board would also have to be changed to two years.
 - If this were the case and the town moved to non-staggered two-year terms, it would impose the possibility that the entire board could change at the same time, leaving no continuity between boards.
 - If, on the other hand, the town changed to staggered two-year terms an election would be held every year. Much of the cost of holding these elections would be paid by the town, because the town must pay for any election not held at the same time as the county general election (and then the county can only bill the town for the additional cost of holding the town election, which is usually nominal).

Second, there is no statutory option to change the current charter by referendum.

Lastly, the only referendum-related action that could be taken to achieve a two-year “term” for the mayor would be to change the town’s charter itself (which may alter the town’s form of government) to either a “Home Rule Charter” or to the General Law City Manager/Commission. In the general law city manager/commission charter, (in this charter the mayor is “elected” for a two-year term from among the members of the city commission, or alternately, the mayor can be elected at-large by the citizenry if such a method is passed by referendum) or to the General Law Modified City Manager/Council Charter (in this charter, the mayor is “elected” for a two-year term from among the other members of the city council).

Other Cities

Across the United States there has been a gradual but significant movement to

increase the term of office of the mayor from 2 years to 4 years, and this trend holds true for cities of all populations. For example, between 1981 and 2001 the percent of cities with 4-year mayoral terms went from 19% (in 1980) to 30% (in 2001).¹

According to a 2006 survey by the International City/County Management Association, 4-year mayor terms are the most common, as shown by the chart below:²

Length of Term	Percentage Reporting
1 year	14%
2 years	35%
3 years	6%
4 years	45%
Other	1%

MTAS looked at 33 cities in Tennessee with the General Law Mayor-Aldermanic Charter and found that only 1 (Walden) utilizes a 2-year term for the mayor (and the board as well). Among 71 Private Act charters we examined, only 6 (Greenfield, Altamont, Athens, Enville, Erin, and Gainesboro) have 2-year mayoral terms. Among these, most select the mayor at large, but at least one chooses from among the board (as we will discuss later, this generally varies by form of government).

Pros and Cons of Moving the Mayor to a 2-Year Term

Pros:

- One study found that variations in the term of the mayor tend to vary according to form of government. The Council-Manager form usually utilizes 2-year terms of office, with the mayor chosen from among the board, while the Strong-Mayor form usually utilizes 4-year terms with the mayor chosen at-large by popular vote.³ Although this study was conducted in 1979 in Virginia, I believe the general results still hold true today, as most Council-Manager forms have 2-year mayoral terms and most Strong-Mayor forms have 4 year mayoral terms. As discussed earlier, this is true in Tennessee as well.
 - This is applicable here and considered a “pro” because Mount Carmel currently operates under a Council-Administrator form of government. Again, this form is generally, although not always (for example Kingsport has a 4-year at-large mayoral term) associated with a 2-year mayoral term elected from among the board (e.g. Johnson City and Elizabethton).

¹ DeSoto, et. al. “Power, Professionalism, and Independence: Changes in the Office of Mayor.” State and Local Government Review. Vol. 38, No. 3, 2016. Page 162.

² Moulder, Evelina. “Municipal Form of Government: Trends in Structure, Responsibility, and Composition.” In the Municipal Year Book, 2008. Washington, DC: International City/County Management Association, 2008.

³ Wikstrom, Nelson. “The Mayor as a Policy Leader in the Council-Manager Form of Government: A View from the Field.” Public Administration Review. Vol. 39, No. 3, May-June 1979. pp 272-273.

- It should here be noted that most Council-Manager (or “Administrator”) forms utilize the “2-year mayor selected from among the board” model so that the office of mayor is “one among equals.” In other words, the office does not have any extraordinary authority or “power.” Instead, the board tends to operate as a “whole”, as one body (similar to a board of directors in the private sector). This provides the manager/administrator with a more unified voice from which to act.
- The mayor may be held more accountable for his or her actions by being elected more often.
- Leadership-related issues may receive more public discussion and accountability because they will be brought up more often as a part of more frequent elections.

Cons:

- Research has shown that the office of mayor will achieve more under a longer term of office.⁴
- The town will have to pay for additional elections.
- A mayor may not pick up the requisite skills to be successful in only 2 years. A 4-year term allows the mayor more time to “grow” in the office. Most board members will tell you it takes at least two years to even begin to understand all the responsibilities associated with governing, and to be effective at it. Thus, two-year terms may reduce a board mayor’s effectiveness.
- The office of the mayor may become more politicized as even minor issues are more frequently brought before the public.
- The office of the mayor may become somewhat immobilized or unwilling to make necessary but difficult decisions because they are beholding to re-election more often.
- A 2-year term discourages a longer-term view from the office of mayor.⁵
- The mayor will be required to spend more and more time campaigning for office.⁶
- A longer term allows the mayor to develop more and stronger relationships with key constituent groups such as the staff, other board members, and community groups.⁷

⁴ DeSoto, et. al., pp 157, 160.

⁵ “Length of Council Terms and Staggered Terms.” Paper from the City of Corpus Christies, Texas. 2020. Page 3.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid.

Conclusion

There does not seem to be a practical way to move the mayoral office to a 2-year term, other than a referendum to change the Mount Carmel charter itself. If this is considered, all kinds of additional discussions will need to be held in order to be sure of a proper fit of a different charter for Mount Carmel.

A former mayor of Indianapolis and advisor to President George Bush, and now a professor at the JFK School of Government at Harvard, points out that the issue is “...largely dependent on the person.”⁸ This implies that a longer term may work best when a high-quality, well-liked mayor is in office. But conversely, when this is not the case a 2-year term would be best.

Thus, the decision has both practical challenges (changing the Mount Carmel charter) as well as challenges related to personalities. In fact, an excellent mayor will help inspire and move a community forward in either a 2- or 4-year term.

⁸ Lupo, Alan. “Two or Four Year Terms for Mayors.” The Boston Globe. July, 7, 2002.



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