

**SHOULD THE PALO ALTO CITY CHARTER BE AMENDED
TO REDUCE THE SIZE OF THE COUNCIL
FROM NINE MEMBERS TO SEVEN MEMBERS ?**

Members of the Palo Alto City Council have debated this issue several times in recent years. A review of the Council minutes of the discussions that occurred at Council meetings during the period from 1990 to the present identified the following pros and cons put forth by Council Members. These arguments may assist you in developing a point of view on the issue and determining whether you would recommend that go measure be put to the voters.

PRO

The Council Size Should Be Reduced to Seven Members

With nine members Palo Alto has the largest City Council for a city its size in the state of California. The main reason Palo Alto has this many council members is because it was viewed to be an appropriate compromise in the 1960s when the Council moved from 15 members to nine members. Most city councils in California have five members, but a seven-member structure probably best captures the advantages of both small and large.

A seven-member Council has proven to work elsewhere in larger cities with bigger budgets and more commitments than Palo Alto. For example, the City of Sunnyvale has a seven-member Council and is an outstanding example of a city that has been successfully involved in regional affairs.

CON

The Council Size Should Remain at Nine Members

To change to a seven-member Council requires amendment of the City's Charter. This action, if it proves unsatisfactory, could only be undone by the voters.

There has been no public clamor for this change. The nine-member Council has been working well. "If it ain't broke, don't fix it."

Palo Alto has a strong interest and sense of responsibility for participation in regional issues. This places additional demands on council members and would be more difficult if there were fewer council members. Palo Alto is unique in that it has all its own utilities; this justifies having a larger Council. There are more agencies requiring council member representation.

The current nine-member Council functions with two standing committees of four members each. This means, with a committee quorum of three, at least a third of the Council is making a recommendation to the full Council. Reducing the Council to seven members could mean reducing the standing committees as well, to three members. Thus, a quorum of only two (a lesser fraction) could be making recommendations to the Council. (The City of Sunnyvale operates differently than Palo Alto; it has no standing committees.)

PRO

A seven member Council takes fewer resources, has less impact on staff and overall would cost less. The Council creates much of the work for staff; with fewer members, there will be fewer Council assignments and individual council member requests. Perhaps there would even be shorter meetings.

A seven-member Council requires more individual accountability and responsibility on the part of each Council member. It would force individual members of the Council to play a stronger role in the policy-making of the City. There is a tendency on the part of members of a larger Council to rely on other members of the Council to take the lead and develop expertise in particular areas, rather than taking responsibility themselves for that particular area.

Now that the Council has established a Utilities Advisory Commission, there is not as much need to identify two or three council members with strong utilities expertise, thus a seven-member Council could manage its responsibilities.

A smaller Council would improve the Council's working relationship with the City Manager and the staff by allowing more individual contact. A smaller Council would improve the balance in decision making between the staff and Council. With a seven-member Council, it is less likely that either the Council or the City Manager could become too powerful.

The opportunity for give and take among the council members would be enhanced with a seven-member body.

CON

Efficiency at Council meetings will not necessarily result from having fewer council members, nor would the meetings be much shorter. It is the public who uses this time at public hearing; Council debates are typically a small part of the meeting.

Seven-member councils are often divisive. Nine is a good number because it does not easily divide itself into coalitions.

The justification for forming the Utilities Advisory Commission in 1991 was to assist the Council with the heavy volume of complex issues with which it has to deal. Reducing the Council size could increase again the burden borne by each council member.

There can be a perception that a Council has more power when there are fewer members. Each council member's vote can carry more weight.

A reduction to seven members could mean less opportunity for the election of independent, creative or visionary council members and less diversity of views on the Council. A review of elections over the past 20 years suggests that several good council members would not have been elected if there had been only seven seats.

It is not the number of members on a Council, but the temperament and the work ethic of the Council, that make interactions possible or impossible.

PRO

While the nine members at the Council might be a diverse group in terms of the perspective or skills they bring to the Council, the fact of the matter is that a nine-member Council has not brought any great measure of diversity in terms of any reasonable set of demographic characteristics (e.g., race, ethnicity, income, family composition, home ownership, education.)

Each council member has an obligation to represent the entire community, regardless of how many members there are. Seven members will not mean less representation for Palo Alto residents.

It is not necessary to have a large Council in order to assure the opportunity for new candidates to be elected. Turnover is guaranteed in Palo Alto with the currently enacted term limits. An excellent candidate well-qualified on the basis of long community involvement, regardless of what part of town he/she is from, can win an election in the community.

CON

The Palo Alto Council should be representative of the average Palo Alto citizen, who most likely is an employed resident. Thus the Council job must be reasonable in terms of the hours of commitment. If the number were reduced from nine to seven, this could mean that each council member would have more to do and the position would be less attractive for someone who has fulltime employment.

Having nine council members provides a better opportunity for citizens to be closer to at least a few of the members because of where they work, live or shop. Council members are more inclined to see more parts of the City and residents are more likely to encounter council members and provide informal as well as formal input.

The opportunity for representation on the Council from all parts of the community could be diminished. There is a perceived difficulty in electing candidates from the area south of the Oregon Expressway and this could exacerbate the situation.

The Palo Alto community has no difficulty producing enough qualified or interested candidates for nine Council seats.

Reducing the Council size to seven would offset the opportunities provided for more people to serve on the Council that were gained by the inception of two-term limits.

The quality of life in Palo Alto would not be radically improved or damaged by the difference between a nine-member and seven-member Council ten years from now.