

BALLOT ISSUE ANALYSIS – 2021 ST PETERSBURG MUNICIPAL GENERAL ELECTION

Amendments to the St. Petersburg City Charter

*The City Charter functions as our municipal constitution. The Charter requires that a review process be conducted every 10 years. A 9-member **Charter Review Commission (CRC)** is appointed by the Mayor and City Council. The CRC is responsible for reviewing the Charter and proposing amendments. The CRC issues a [public report](#) about its proposals. The proposed amendments are then placed on the general election ballot for voters to decide if these changes should be made to the City Charter. If more than 50% of voters vote yes, then the amendment passes.*

CHARTER AMENDMENT 1

Limiting City Council elections to voters in the applicable Council District and making related changes

Ballot Language: *Currently, City Council Members are elected through primary elections limited to voters in the Council district and general elections open to all City voters. Shall the Charter be amended to (i) limit primary and general elections for Council Members to voters in the Council district, thereby eliminating City-wide voting for Council Members; (ii) allow a candidate receiving more than 50% of votes in the primary to be elected; and (iii) make other clarifying changes? Yes/No*

Synopsis: This amendment proposes to change how non-partisan St. Petersburg City Council Members are elected:

- **Current System:** Single-district primary elections followed by at-large general election run-offs. This means that residents of a particular district get to select the top two candidates for their district in the primary, and then the whole city votes in the general election on which of those top two candidates will be elected to City Council.
- **Proposed New System:** Fully single-district election process. This means that residents of a particular district would select the top two candidates for their district during the primary election, and then only district residents would vote in the general election on which of the top two candidates is elected to City Council. In this system, a candidate can win during the primary election if they receive more than 50% of the votes.

This amendment would also:

- Increase the public notice about primary and general elections by requiring notice to be published in a newspaper of general circulation, to appear in that newspaper on five consecutive days, and to include the name of each office on the ballot, the name of each candidate, and information on how to register and vote in that election.
- Require that the process for resolving ties between two or more Council candidates for the same position be made open to the public.

The CRC provided three main reasons for recommending this change:

1. Under the current system, “voters from outside a district can override the preferences of voters within the district.”

2. Minority candidates may be at a disadvantage with respect to winning a city-wide general election against a non-minority candidate, even if they are running to represent a majority-minority district.
3. Because city-wide election campaigns are more expensive than district-specific campaigns, the current system “unfairly favors wealthy candidates and those with access to wealthier donors.”

St. Petersburg has a “strong mayor” form of city government. Among other Florida cities who have strong mayor systems, Miami and Orlando have single-district elections for City Council, Hialeah and West Palm Beach have fully at-large elections for City Council, and Tampa and Jacksonville have mixed systems with some Council Members elected from single-districts and others elected at-large. The CRC reportedly did not recommend a mixed system at this time because of their recommendations for reforms to the redistricting process (see Amendment 2), among other concerns.

Supporters: Charter Review Commission, American Civil Liberties Union, Southern Poverty Law Center

Opponents: Tampa Bay Times Editorial Board

A Yes Vote Would:

- Change the way St. Petersburg elects non-partisan City Council members. Council members would be elected entirely by the registered voters who live in their district.
- Enable non-partisan City Council candidates to win during the primary election, if they receive more than 50% of the votes.
- Increase requirements for public notice about the primary and general elections.
- Require that the process for resolving ties between two or more Council candidates for the same position be made open to the public.
- Better enable districts to elect candidates that best represent them, because their candidate preferences could not be superseded by city-wide voters.
- Make elected City Council members accountable only to the registered voters of their districts at the ballot box. This would change the incentives for Council Members. It would increase the incentive for individual Council members to address the specific needs and interests of their districts, but it may decrease their focus on issues that impact districts other than their own.
- Make running for City Council more financially accessible to a greater diversity of candidates and potentially lessen the influence of money in city elections, because candidates will no longer need to raise funding for a city-wide general election campaign.
- Potentially make it easier for minority candidates to win seats on City Council representing majority-minority districts, especially if they are running against a non-minority candidate.
- Potentially increase “horse trading” and politicized alliances within City Council, as council members seek to obtain desired or avoid unpopular programs or actions within their districts. This could decrease cooperation among City Council members as it increases focus on district-specific issues; alternatively, it could also potentially increase consensus-building around how issues impact the different districts within the city.

A No Vote Would:

- Keep the current system for electing non-partisan City Council members: voters in the district select the top two candidates in the primary election, and then the entire city votes in the general election on which of these two candidates will be elected to Council.
- Make no changes to the current minimum public notice requirements about primary and general elections.

- Make no changes to the current process for resolving ties between two or more Council candidates for the same position.
- Leave in place the current ability for city-wide voters to override the candidate preference of district voters, regardless of the percentage of votes that a candidate wins in their district during the primary. This may make it more difficult for minority candidates to get elected.
- Maintain accountability of non-partisan City Council members to all registered voters across the city at the ballot box. The current incentives for Council members would remain unchanged.
- Maintain a greater need for money in city elections (because candidates for City Council must finance a city-wide campaign), making it more difficult for candidates with less access to wealth to run for office and potentially increasing influence of monied interests.
- Maintain current incentive structure for cooperation among City Council members.

CHARTER AMENDMENT 2

Establishing new process for drawing district boundaries for election of City Council members

Ballot Language: *Shall the City create a new process for establishing City Council district boundaries that (i) uses comprehensive standards for drawing equitable district boundaries; (ii) has requirements and restrictions for appointment, service, communication, and accepting public comment; and (iii) requires City Council to be bound by commission recommendations unless inconsistent with applicable law? The new process would occur every ten years and maintain the existing nine-member citizens commission appointed by the Mayor and Council Members. Yes/No*

Synopsis: This amendment creates standards and processes by which City Council district lines are drawn, which the current city charter does not have. The charter amendment is intended to achieve two goals:

- To establish qualifying standards and application processes that will preserve the independence of the redistricting commission.
- To bring the city's redistricting processes in line with the standards set forth by Fair Districts, which voters added to the Florida Constitution in 2010. The Fair Districts criteria require that state legislative and federal congressional districts be drawn compactly, with approximately equal population and using existing boundaries when possible. It forbids drawing district lines to favor or oppose a candidate, incumbent or political party, or to dilute the electoral power of a racial or language minority.

The amendment allows the mayor and each member of City Council to appoint the members of the commission. However, it also puts several qualifying standards in place regarding who those appointees can be, including:

- Commission members cannot have run for city office in the 10 years prior to appointment, nor can they run for office for 10 years after appointment.
- Candidates, campaign staffers, elected officials, city employees and others are subject to restrictions regarding their eligibility to serve on this commission.
- Commission members must have voted in two of the previous three municipal elections OR been a resident of St. Petersburg for the last seven years.

The amendment requires that the application process be standardized, and it must also include the development of a wide pool of potential appointees who reflect the city's diversity.

The amendment also lays out the following rules for the redistricting process itself:

- Requires that district lines be drawn so they are in line with the Fair Districts criteria in the Florida Constitution and prohibits lines from being drawn to favor or oppose a candidate, incumbent, political party or political group.
- Details required timelines and steps for commission meetings, including public hearings and the submission of the final report and City Council's final vote on whether to accept the report.
- Sets requirements for staffers who will be made available to support the commission.

Finally, the amendment would require that the City Council accept the commission's final redistricting report. The City Council would be allowed to reject the final report, but only if at least six council members vote to do so. If that happens, the City Council will have to document each reason for rejecting the report and require the Redistricting Commission to address each issue.

Supporters: Charter Review Commission, League of Women Voters of the St Petersburg Area

Opponents: Tampa Bay Times Editorial Board

A Yes Vote Would:

- Create standards aimed at making the redistricting process more transparent and independent.
- Require that district maps be drawn so they are in line with Fair Districts criteria.
- Encourage the mayor and city council members to broaden their search for appointees to this commission.
- Establish disqualifying standards and an application process aimed at ensuring independence and preventing potential conflicts of interest in the redistricting process.
- Potentially provide a wider range of citizens with the opportunity to serve on this commission.
- Potentially prevent otherwise qualified people from serving on the commission.
- Bring St. Petersburg in line with current redistricting best practices.

A No Vote Would:

- Leave the current standards and processes intact. This means the mayor and each City Council member appoints one person each to the Redistricting Commission, and that the redistricting process will continue without residency requirements, specified timelines or rules aimed at protecting the commission's independence.

CHARTER AMENDMENT 3

Establishing an equity framework and Chief Equity Officer for City government

Ballot Language: *Analysis of demographic and economic data for Pinellas County indicates that the region's economy would benefit from eliminating equity gaps based on race, ethnicity, or other immutable characteristics. Shall the City Charter be amended to establish an equity framework intended to address those equity gaps? That framework must include an equity action plan implemented at City-wide and departmental levels, regular assessment and reporting, and the creation of a Chief Equity Officer for the City. Yes/No*

Synopsis:

This amendment proposes to:

- Establish an equity action plan for the City of St. Petersburg, in order to develop and sustain "an organizational infrastructure that addresses equity gaps internally and externally." The plan must cover at least 1 fiscal year and be implemented throughout all departments of City government.
- Require that the City, on an annual basis, assess the equity plan for progress, make public an annual report of the progress, and update the plan as needed to reflect these assessments.
- Create a new Charter position of Chief Equity Officer tasked with overseeing implementation of the equity action plan and coordinating community outreach on equity issues, and require the City to ensure resources to support this position and the ability for it to fulfill its duties.

There is precedent for the CRC to consider specific issues of importance regarding the well-being of the City, as the 2011 CRC considered the protection of waterfront parks.

The CRC's report highlighted that Pinellas County will continue to become more diverse over the coming decades and a majority of the county's residents will be people of color. The success and prosperity of Pinellas County will rely on dismantling barriers created through a long history of racial discrimination and disinvestment in communities of color.

In considering this recommendation, the CRC referred to data from a 2019 study conducted by the PolicyLink research institute and the Program for Environmental and Regional Equity (PERE) at the University of Southern California, which found that Black and Brown residents of Pinellas County face inequities across indicators of economic vitality, youth preparedness, health, and others. The study also found that closing racial equity gaps would have a significant economic impact by increasing Pinellas County's GDP.

The equity action plan is intended to address those differential outcomes based on race, ethnicity or any other immutable characteristics at all levels of City government; eliminate barriers to public involvement in decisions, programs and services of City government; and promote the achievement of equity throughout the St. Petersburg community.

Supporters: Charter Review Commission, League of Women Voters of the St Petersburg Area

Opponents: Tampa Bay Times Editorial Board

A Yes Vote Would:

- Require the City to establish an action plan to address equity gaps, and assess and report on this plan annually.
- Establish a new position of Chief Equity Officer, required by the City Charter, whose primary duty will be to help devise and implement the equity action plan.
- Require the City to ensure resources for the Chief Equity Officer position and for the ability of this position to fulfill its duties.
- Help close equity gaps in the City, which research indicates would have positive economic and community impacts.

A No Vote Would:

- Maintain the current situation, in which there is no requirement for the City to have an action plan for addressing equity issues.

- Maintain the current situation. in which there is no Charter-required position specifically tasked with implementation and accountability for equity initiatives.

CHARTER AMENDMENT 4

Establishing a requirement for Charter-protected equity funding

Ballot Language: *Analysis of demographic and economic data for Pinellas County indicates that the region's economy would benefit from eliminating equity gaps based on race, ethnicity, or other immutable characteristics. Shall the City Charter be amended to require that the City designate "Charter-protected equity funding" to address those equity gaps and prevent that funding from being used for other purposes? This amendment would not prohibit the City from funding equity-related initiatives with other, unrestricted funding. Yes/No*

Synopsis: This amendment would require the City to "provide and protect funding for equity-related initiatives." Once designated as charter-protected equity funding, these funds could not be used for other purposes. This amendment does not set any specific or minimum amount of funds that must be designated as charter-protected equity funding. This amendment also does not prohibit the City from using other funding for equity-related initiatives.

Amendment 4 is linked in part to Amendment 3. If Amendment 3 passes, charter-protected equity funds would be used to implement the City's formal equity action plan. If Amendment 3 does not pass, these funds would be used to support initiatives that are intended to (1) prevent differential outcomes based on race, ethnicity or any other immutable characteristics at any level of City government, (2) eliminate barriers to public involvement in decisions, programs and services of City government, and/or (3) promote the achievement of equity throughout the St. Petersburg community. This could include a broad range of initiatives, such as efforts to ensure affordable housing, among others.

The CRC recommended this amendment "[b]ecause eliminating such equity gaps would promote the economic development of the City."

Supporters: Charter Review Commission, League of Women Voters of the St Petersburg Area

Opponents: Tampa Bay Times Editorial Board

A Yes Vote Would:

- Require City Council to designate revenue within the budget to implement equity-related initiatives. Once designated, these funds would be protected from other uses.
- Not require any specific or minimum amount of funds be designated (\$1 would comply with the requirement).
- Not prohibit the City from using other funding for equity-related initiatives.
- Dedicate funding to help closing equity gaps in the City, which research indicates would have positive economic impacts.

A No Vote Would:

- Not require the City Council to specifically designate revenue within the budget to implement equity-related initiatives.

CHARTER AMENDMENT 5

Establishing new requirements related to City Administrator, City Clerk, and City Council Administrative Officer

Ballot Language: *The Charter provides requirements and duties for certain City officials appointed by the Mayor with consent of City Council. Shall the Charter be amended to (i) add a residency requirement for the City Administrator; (ii) clarify that the City Clerk serves both Mayor and Council and may be removed only with consent of both; (iii) provide the City Council Administrative Officer with duties and protections similar to the City Clerk; and (iv) make related changes? Yes/No*

Synopsis: This amendment would clarify roles, responsibilities and other issues associated with three existing city government positions:

- *City Administrator:* Defines the required experience and qualifications for this position and requires the individual serving in this role to establish residency within the City within six months of hire. This position is appointed by the Mayor and confirmed by the City Council.
- *City Clerk:* Clarifies that the City Clerk may respond to and work directly with all aspects of City Government, including City Council, and that this position can only be removed by the Mayor with approval of a majority of City Council.
- *City Council Administrative Officer:* Specifically identifies this position within the Charter and states its responsibilities. This position is the chief administrative official of the city council and supervises the management of and public contact with the office of the City Council. This position is responsible for hiring and managing staff and legislative aides as necessary. This position is appointed by the Mayor and confirmed by City council, and may only be removed by the Mayor with approval of at least five members of City Council.

This amendment was proposed by the CRC to clarify these key positions and their roles and responsibilities.

Supporters: Charter Review Commission

Opponents: Tampa Bay Times Editorial Board

A Yes Vote Would:

- Have the Charter define the required experience and qualifications of the City Administrator.
- Require the person appointed as City Administrator to establish city residency within the first six months of the first date of employment.
- Revise the Charter to clarify that the City Clerk may respond to and work directly with the City Council.
- Specifically identify the position of City Council Administrative Officer within the Charter and define its responsibilities as the chief administrative official of the city council.
- Define that the City Council Administrative Officer is responsible for the hiring and managing of the staff and legislative aides of City Council.
- Ensure that the City Clerk and the City Council Administrative Officer may only be removed by the Mayor with the approval of the City Council.

A No Vote Would:

- Leave the experience, qualifications and duties of the City Administrator up to the Mayor.
- Not require the City Administrator, who exercises the powers and performs the duties of the Mayor during the Mayor's absence, to reside in the city.
- Keep the City Council Administrative Officer as a staff position whose duties are not addressed in the Charter.
- Leave the management and supervision of City Council support staff less clearly defined, potentially impacting efficiencies as well as conflict over staff direction, hiring and firing decisions.

CHARTER AMENDMENT 6

Changing the City's Charter-review process to avoid conflict with redistricting and make other improvements

Ballot Language: *Every 10 years, the City conducts a Charter-review process to consider the operation of City government and propose amendments to the Charter. Issues occur when the Charter-review process changes the process for redrawing City Council districts because the two processes are scheduled to occur almost simultaneously. Shall the Charter be amended to resolve that scheduling conflict and to make other changes to improve the administration and integrity of the City's Charter-review process? Yes/No*

Synopsis: This amendment would make changes to how the St Petersburg Charter Review Commission works, with the goal of strengthening credibility of the Charter-review process.

Current process: The Charter currently requires the City to review the City Charter every 10 years. It also requires the City to consider redrawing the district boundaries for City Council members every 10 years. The Charter review is specifically designated to occur in years ending in 1 (2011, 2021, etc.) and redistricting is to be based on data from the federal census, which occurs every decade (2010, 2020, etc.).

The two processes currently either overlap or occur in very close proximity. This can affect the timing and implementation of redistricting, and make it difficult for the Charter Review Commission to recommend changes that are related to redistricting.

New proposed process: This proposal would change the timing of the Charter review to eliminate potential conflict with redistricting, by requiring the Charter Review Commission to be established and finished with its work in years ending in 9.

This amendment would also clarify other process issues related to the Charter Review Commission including: establishing conflict of interest policies, outlining clear timing for the formation of the Commission, and establishing requirements for participation in the Charter review process.

Supporters: Charter Review Commission, League of Women Voters of the St Petersburg Area, Tampa Bay Times Editorial Board

Opponents: None known at this time

A Yes Vote Would:

- Initiate the next Charter review eight years from now (2029), so it occurs two years before the next redistricting process. After 2029, the process will return to the regular 10-year schedule,

occurring every 10 years in years ending in 9. This will prevent scheduling conflicts with the redistricting process going forward.

- Begin the process of forming the Charter Review Commission in August of the year before the Charter review is due to ensure work can begin on time.
- Establish eligibility requirements for members of the Commission as well as policies regarding conflicts of interest and other actions of appointed Commission members.
- Provide for administrative support for the Charter-review process.

A No Vote Would:

- Continue the pattern of both the Charter review and redistricting occurring at the same time (in years ending in 1).
- Potentially result in the City having to accelerate or delay changes related to redistricting, and create uncertainty around the City redistricting process.

CHARTER AMENDMENT 7

Adding a preamble to describe the spirit of the Charter and the City's governing philosophy

Ballot Language: *Shall the Charter be amended to add a preamble containing a concise statement to describe the spirit of the Charter and the City's governing philosophy? That aspirational statement will describe the City's vision, goals, values, and priorities while acknowledging past shortcomings and promising a renewed and continuing commitment to improving the quality of life for all citizens. Yes/No*

Synopsis:

This amendment proposes to add the following preamble to the City Charter:

"We the people of St. Petersburg, under the constitution and laws of the state of Florida, in order to secure the benefits of local, responsive self-government that provides for the greatest common good, do hereby adopt this Charter. Reflecting our shared vision, St. Petersburg will be a city of opportunity for all who come to live, work, and play. We will be an innovative, creative, and competitive community that acknowledges our past while pursuing our future. Accordingly, this charter will advance the City's values of civic engagement, inclusive prosperity, and cultural vibrancy in a way that is supported by a shared commitment to equity, environmental stewardship, education, public health, arts, and world class recreation.

By this action, we secure the benefits of home rule, affirm the values of representative democracy, and assert the importance of inclusive citizen engagement.

In keeping with a commitment to more effectively represent the interests of every citizen, we commit that, as frequently as this Charter is reviewed, community members will convene to affirm and improve our structure of government with intentional priority on those self-evident determinants that work to define residents' opportunities and quality of life. This Charter affirms the City's values and strives to ensure a living framework to help build an ever more inclusive, engaged St. Petersburg, where everyone experiences belonging, fairness, human rights, and fundamental freedoms."

The preamble is intended "to serve as a concise statement of the City's vision for the future" and "define the City's aspirational goals, values and priorities."

Supporters: Charter Review Commission

Opponents: Tampa Bay Times Editorial Board

A Yes Vote Would:

- Add the above preamble to the beginning of the St Petersburg City Charter.

A No Vote Would:

- Leave the St Petersburg City Charter as is, with no preamble.

Referendum Question

Providing City Council with the Authority to Grant Economic Development Ad Valorem Tax Exemptions

Ballot Language: *Shall the City Council of St. Petersburg be authorized to grant, pursuant to s. 3, Art. VII of the State Constitution, property tax exemptions to new businesses and expansions of existing businesses that are expected to create new, full-time jobs in the City of St. Petersburg? Yes/No*

Synopsis: An ad valorem tax is a tax on the value of real estate or other property. This measure would give the St Petersburg City Council the power, for the next 10 years, to continue granting property tax exemptions to certain qualifying businesses that create new capital investment and new, full-time jobs in the city.

St. Petersburg voters approved a similar referendum in November 2011. This tax exemption was designed for “businesses that create a minimum of 10 jobs that earn more than the average wage in Pinellas County,” according to the [Tampa Bay Times](#).

Since 2011, the City has granted these tax exemptions to two large businesses: one for an exemption of \$100,000 per year for five years and another for an exemption of around \$67,000 per year for five years. The second of these exemptions was granted for a project in the northernmost part of the City that - at the time of approval in 2020 - involved \$11 million in capital investment and created a dozen new tech jobs paying an average salary of \$95,000, according to the [St. Pete Catalyst](#).

[The City Administration recommended this ballot measure](#) with the rationale that it supports St. Petersburg’s competitive position among neighboring cities and counties.

Supporters: St Petersburg City Administration

Opponents: None known at this time

A Yes Vote Would:

- Continue the City Council’s power, for the next 10 years, to grant tax exemptions to certain businesses that create new capital investment or new full-time jobs.
- Reduce tax revenue available for funding City services and infrastructure.
- Continue to provide this tax incentive for qualifying businesses in St. Petersburg.

A No Vote Would:

- End City Council’s power to grant tax exemptions to certain businesses.
- Not reduce tax revenue available for funding City services and infrastructure
- No longer provide this tax incentive for businesses.