Media Coverage Overview

City of Portland Charter Transition Project

Covering November 2022 to January 2025

Public Information Officer: Christine Llobregat

Here's how to run for the newly expanded Portland City Council in November

Voters will be electing three council members from each of Portland's four new districts in November — which means there's a big, wide open field.

Author: Pat Dooris, Jamie Parfitt

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PORTLAND, Ore. — Whether you live in Portland or not, the November election in this city should be an interesting one to watch. For better or worse, the city embarks on a grand experiment this year — electing a newly expanded city council, drawn from four all-new districts, using a form of voting that's new to the city, to then oversee a completely overhauled government.

There's been a change in timing, too. Instead of having a spring primary election to weed out the field, the city will hold a single election in November to determine all 12 of the new council members. Portland will also elect a mayor and a city auditor.

A number of people have already thrown their hats into the ring for the new council, and others are still either mulling a run or putting together campaigns.

But given the sheer number of changes this time around, The Story thought it might be worth walking through all the basic steps of what it takes to run for city council in Portland, and in a field that's more wide-open than it's ever been. We asked Deborah Scroggin, elections director for the city of Portland, to be our guide.

Scroggin has a firm grasp on everything that's happening this year, and she acknowledges that it will be both historic and complicated.

"I think this is the biggest change we've seen in recent memory," she said.

I do declare

Dozens of people have already declared that they're going to run for city council in November between the various positions. But, Scroggin clarified, none of them are officially running just yet.

"A lot of folks have said, 'Hey, I'm gonna raise money, I'm gonna file for public matching funds, I'm going to put my name in the media,' that sort of thing, which is perfectly fine," Scroggin said. "You can't actually file for office with the city elections office until June 5 — just want to let folks know that you may see names floating around, but those are not official yet, so the filing window starting June 5 will have all the information for candidates available currently in our candidate guide."

On top of that official declaration to the elections office, either through filling out a form online or visiting the city elections office in person, candidates need to pay a fee of $75 if they're running for a council seat and $100 for mayor or auditor. If the cost is too high, candidates can canvas their district for 500 signatures from registered voters saying that they want to see that person run.

"We upped the fees a little bit — they hadn't been upped since the 90s," Scroggin said. "And we changed it to 500 signatures to align better with state law. But either way, it's to show us you really want to be on the ballot, and you take this seriously."

After paying the fee or gathering signatures to register with the city elections office, staff in Scroggin's office will be making sure that candidates can legally be in the race.

"What's next is we determine if they meet all the requirements," she said. "Are you a citizen of the United States or your resident of the city of Portland? Or are you in the right district? Are you registered to vote? The requirements are laid out in our candidate guide. Again, one thing I'd like to highlight is that you really do have to be a resident of that district a year prior to the election."

Since city council members are now elected by district, candidates must have lived in the district they hope to represent as of this past November, or 12 months prior to the election.

"I would just contact us, look up your district, go to portlandmaps.com, see where you actually are," Scroggin said. "Make sure where you're moving ... Ask around. Look at look at the map and make sure you're in the right place."

Donors big and small

There's a reason why some folks have already said they're running, and it's to start gathering contributions so they can buy things like yard signs, stickers and colorful postcards that they can mail out to voters. But there are a decent number of rules governing how to go about raising funds in Portland.

Before starting to raise money, it's worth calling Portland's Small Donor Elections program to ask for a free and confidential class on how campaign finance works broadly in the city. For

example, candidates can only accept a maximum of $579 from any one person, and they must be a U.S. resident age 18 or older to qualify.

But to receive support from the small donor program, candidates must agree not to take more than $350 from any one donor, and the donors must live within the city of Portland. The program was designed to encourage candidates to raise money from within the city.

“Small donor elections is in another agency in the city," Scroggin explained. "They offer public funds to run a campaign, and there's a lot of requirements to get those funds and to qualify for them. We have the basic information for that in here, but I would also encourage them to get ahold of small donor elections in the city of Portland."

Through the small donor program, the city will match $9 for every $1 raised up to $20. That means if someone gives $20 to a qualified candidate, the city will give them $180.

In order to qualify, candidates must take the small donor training. Candidates running for mayor must then collect at least 750 donations of anywhere between $5 and $350, and candidates for auditor or city council must collect 250 contributions between $5 and $350. Those qualifying contributions must also come from residents of Portland.

After meeting that threshold, the city of Portland will start doling out the matching money. Right now, candidates for mayor can get up to $100,000 in matching funds; candidates for auditor can get up to $40,000 in matching funds; and candidates for city council can get up to $120,000. Those amounts may change in the future, but that's where they are now.

Candidates don't have to take advantage of the small donor program. Those who decide not to use it can take contributions of up to $579 from anyone, whether inside the city or out. But for those who are interested, the deadline to apply is Aug. 1.

Stumping in Stumptown

The next step would be to really get a campaign going, and candidates need to know that there are requirements about the kind of disclaimers that need to accompany political advertising — more rigorous ones than we usually see on the TV ads for bigger races.

"Voters passed a law in 2018 requiring certain disclaimers on political communication. Now there's the top line, which is that 'Paid for by' ... you know, we're all kind of used to seeing that," Scroggin said. "But then, ours require even deeper — dominant funders that may be funding that campaign overall, if they're over a certain limit, they need to be disclosed there as funders."

Essentially, candidates need to be transparent about how their campaigns are being funded, disclosing any big backers on things like mailings and advertisements, but not on smaller

things like signs or stickers. That's a bit complicated to unpack, but Scroggin said candidates should consult the elections office for any clarifications.

"What we really want candidates to know is that these are involved requirements to discuss how your campaign is being funded and to disclose that to the public," she said. "Voters passed that in 2018, and we're here to make sure that it is understood in advance. People can come to us with questions — we can't provide legal advice, of course, but we also have put out a campaign finance manual that has examples."

Ballots will go out in the mail on Oct. 16. Voter must have them dropped in a ballot box or postmarked by 8 p.m. on Election Day, Nov. 5, in order to have them counted.

"We do think it will be one of the busiest elections in history, if not the busiest election in history in terms of candidates on the ballot," Scroggin said. "So I really want to demystify the process for everyone. It shouldn't be a surprise when you open up your ballot."

Scroggin said with so many candidates running, her office will be fielding a huge number of questions and concerns. This much change in this short amount of time can get confusing, she said — for candidates and voters alike.

The ballots alone are going to look pretty different in Portland, due to the new voting system and new multi-member districts. Voters will only see city council candidates for the district in which they live, and they'll be instructed to vote for six different people, ranking them from first to sixth. The rest is handled behind the scenes.

Ranked choice voting is far from untried — it's actually becoming more and more popular throughout the country — but this will be the first time it's making landfall in Portland. There's enough confusion about ranked choice voting that The Story will devote an upcoming report to that alone before ballots go out, so stay tuned.

Portland official Michael Jordan outlines the city's progress on transitioning to a new form of government

Portlanders voted in 2022 to completely overhaul the city's form of government. It's Chief Administrative Officer Michael Jordan's job to make that happen.

Author: KGW Staff

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PORTLAND, Ore. — Portland is now less than a year away from abandoning the commission-style form of government that the city has used for more than a century. It's a dramatic change, and the plan that Portlanders approved in late 2022 gave the city only two years to prepare. With half of that time already gone, city leaders are racing against the clock to meet that deadline.

The mayor and commissioners function as the city council and also directly oversee city bureaus under the current system, but the overhaul will split up those roles. The council will expand to 12 members — three from each of four new geographic districts — and it will only set policy. The mayor will no longer be on the council and will instead oversee a professional city administrator in charge of all day-to-day operations.

"For the first time, there will only be one person that kind of calls the ball, if you will, for the city, rather than five elected officials that the bureaus report up to," explained Portland Chief Administrative Officer Michael Jordan.

Jordan previously directed Portland's Bureau of Environmental Services, and before that, he was a Clackamas County Commissioner and worked for 11 years at Pacific Power and Light. Jordan was a guest on this week's episode of "Straight Talk" to help make sense of the new city government structure and provide an update on the progress of the transition process.

How did we get here?

The government transition plan is brand new, but it began with a process that Portland has undertaken many times. Under the city's current charter, the city council required to appoint a charter review commission every 10 years to examine the city's government structure and recommend improvements, which are then put to voters for approval.

Portlanders have historically rejected every proposed government system change and opted to stick with the commission model, but the 2020 charter commission was

convened at a time of significant public frustration with the city's government, and the group responded by proposing a radical overhaul. And when Portland voters got a chance to weigh in on the commission's proposal in November 2022, they decided it was finally time to take the plunge on a new system.

Portland is currently the biggest city in the U.S. that still uses the commission form of government — all the others have switched to various systems like "strong mayor" or "mayor-council," Jordan explained. Portland's new system will still have some unique quirks, but the key thing it will have in common with those other models is that it will make just one person accountable for the entire executive branch.

"What I tell people is we're actually moving from being the outlier to being in the norm of how city governments operate in the United States," Jordan said.

Jordan's role

As the city's Chief Administrative Officer under the current government structure, Jordan reports to Mayor Ted Wheeler and is in charge of human resources, technology services and the city vehicle fleet and facilities. But he's taken on a major new role for the past year.

Shortly after Portland voters approved the charter reform proposal, the city council appointed Jordan to lead the team handling all the aspects of implementing the transition, such as setting up a commission to determine city's four new geographic districts, another commission to set new salaries for elected officials and a committee to gather public input.

One of the biggest tasks has been to fully map out the structure of the new form of government, including the service department structure that will replace the bureau system and where every city employee will fit into the hierarchy that reports up to the city administrator.

The past year has been the "architectural phase," he explained, coming up with an overall new design to present to the council for evaluation. Now that the council has given final approval, the transition project is now in the "construction phase," trying to get everything set up to "hand the keys over" to a new mayor and council in January 2025.

New organizational chart

Jordan's office published a proposed organizational chart last year, dividing the city's services into six primary areas: Budget and Finance, City Operations, Community & Economic Development, Public Safety, Public Works and "Vibrant Communities," which includes arts, parks and recreation and the Portland Children's Levy. The council formally adopted the organizational structure in November.

Each of those departments will be run by a separate deputy administrator, and they'll all report to the main city administrator. There are a few other positions that will report to the city administrator but be outside of those six departments, such as a city equity officer and an assistance city administrator in charge of things like communications. Jordan said the administrator and six deputies will likely form "the core of the executive team for the city."

The city attorney, chief of police and chief of staff will report directly to the mayor instead of the city administrator, and the Portland Auditor will be in charge of a separate division outside of the rest of the government structure. Keeping the police chief outside of the department structure might appear odd at first glance, Jordan said, but some other cities do it that way, too.

"It's not unusual to have the elected body or the elected executives retain the authority, particularly for police chiefs; it's such an important role in local government," he said.

Rapid transition

In order to allow the new government structure to function immediately out of the gate, the current city council will appoint an interim city administrator and other interim leadership staff later this year, Jordan explained, and the city will officially transition to the new structure on July 1, even though the new mayor and council won't be elected until November and won't take office until January 2025.

Jordon's current job won't exist after July 1, but Wheeler has hinted during past council discussions that he may want to see Jordan move into the interim city manager position at that point, and Jordan appeared to acknowledge that possibility this week — although he said whether he remains in the job after the November election will depend on whether the mayor-elect wants him to stay.

"We'll see what happens, but if I'm in that acting city administrator role, the day after the election, I'll be calling the mayor-elect and saying, 'Probably your most important decision this first term will be to hire the city's first city administrator,'" he said.

The new mayor will need to start the search right away, he said, but the overall hiring process could take four to six months. When asked if he'd be interested in the permanent position, Jordan said he will "probably not be an applicant," adding that he feels he's "a little old" for the job.

What will it mean for city employees?

Portland employs more than 7,000 people, and Jordan said the vast majority of them will see very little change in their day-to-day work because the city will still need to provide all of the same essential services. The transition is also not intended as a headcount

reduction measure, he added — if anything, many of current bureaus often seem overwhelmed by work.

"Having said that… the city's facing a pretty tough budget year," he said. "The Bureau of Development Services has already laid off 56 folks, and I would imagine the Bureau of Transportation is facing potential layoffs this year also. So that doesn't mean there won't be layoffs, but they're not associated with the transition, at least not initially."

The big changes will be on a broader level. The city's current structure is "good at being vertical," Jordan said, meaning that the chain of command is very clear within each bureau, all the way up to the mayor or commissioner in charge. The problem is that the city isn't so good at being horizontal, meaning taking actions that cross multiple bureaus.

"Most of the big problems we face are multi-disciplinary," he said, "and it is almost impossible for one bureau or one office to resolve those really big problems."

Cost of the new government

The cost of running the new government has become a particular point of controversy in the past year. The estimate in the 2022 voter initiative was $900,000 to $8.7 million per year, compared to about $10 million per year to run the current government. But the estimate has since ballooned to $23.9 million per year for the new government, on top of about $4-5 million in one-time transition costs. Portland's total annual budget is about $7 billion.

The original estimate only accounted for the larger city council, Jordan said — the new support staff, such as the deputy city administrators, weren't part of the reform package, so they weren't factored into the estimate. Making things more complicated, the city budgets on a fiscal year that runs from July 1 to June 30, so the actual transition will happen halfway through a budget cycle — that's part of why the department reorganization is set to happen in July.

The final budget is still being developed as part of the city's regular budgeting process for the next fiscal year, so Jordan said the next step will be a budget proposal presented to Wheeler, who will then incorporate budget proposals from all the other departments into an overall proposed budget in April, and the council will then deliberate and get the final say.

The transition team is currently making public presentations all over the city about the budget process and other aspects of the process. Portlanders who want to learn more or have input on the process can look up a meeting here.

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City Struggles to Find Viable Space for New District Council Offices

The problem that's raising costs: the city's fiber network.

By Sophie Peel

February 09, 2024 at 1:48 pm PST

The city official charged with establishing district-based offices for the 12 future members of the Portland City Council delivered a grim update earlier this week on securing appropriate spaces as the city barrels toward a new form of government.

The city's manager of asset management, Maty Sauter, laid out on Tuesday the difficult reality of setting up City Council offices in the four newly drawn geographic voting districts. Sauter delivered the gloomy news to a citizen committee that's advising the city on the government transition.

Sauter explained two stubborn problems. First, she and her team are struggling to find viable space to set up offices east of Interstate 205 in District 1. The irony was not lost on Sauter: A primary reason Portlanders approved a 2022 ballot measure overhauling Portland's form of government was to make City Hall more representative of, and responsive to, citizens living in East Portland.

"Where we're really getting into trouble is District 1. This entire conversation probably sprouted because individuals in District 1 don't always feel like they have a lot of access to downtown spaces," Sauter said. "Indeed, we're finding a lot of trouble locating a space in that area."

The second problem faced by Sauter's team is more technical: the city's fiber network.

Sauter explained that City Hall's security system—including security officers, security cameras and badge access—is connected and made possible by a fiber network strung above the streets like phone lines and running underground. Installing a security system in each of the new geographic districts that links back to the one at City Hall would require an intense expansion of city government's current fiber network capabilities. (Having a linked security system ensures a quicker and more robust emergency response system.) Building out fiber network infrastructure requires city crews digging trenches in the ground.

“You’re taking a security profile that’s already very difficult to service, and then you spread it all over the city,” Sauter explained. “That quintuples, when you add City Hall, the number of security officers and security cameras that have to be on the city’s fiber network. If they want to have real-time response and monitoring, you have to be on the network. And that just pushes the cost way up.”

Sauter’s team conducted a survey of 37 other cities that have geographic representation. None, she said, has district-based offices “because of the exact same reason we’re honestly not wanting to pursue them.”

Sauter, who made it clear that the city is “on a ticking clock” when it comes to making decisions about district offices, later added: “Given the fact that so few other cities do this, I think it’s worth asking ourselves, what were we really trying to accomplish with this? Was it a specific demographic, a specific geography, that felt like it couldn’t access what was downtown? Was it a specific frustration?”

The slide presentation made to the advisory committee on Tuesday noted that “current internal [cost] estimates are very high” for establishing district offices, “both one-time and ongoing.” The city’s Office of Management & Finance and the government transition team did not immediately provide those cost estimates to *WW*.

For nearly a year now, Sauter and other city employees handling the transition have warned the City Council that the two-year transition is a big ask, and one that will involve many unforeseen expenses—including those incurred by setting up district offices. Despite those warnings, the City Council has asked that the transition team establish district-based offices before the new 12-member City Council takes office on Jan. 1, 2025.

Sauter says that in recent weeks she’s shared the difficulty and costs of setting up security in new district offices to the City Council, the majority of whose members—most vocally Commissioners Mingus Mapps, Rene Gonzalez and Dan Ryan—have complained about the rising costs of the government transition.

But Sauter warned that those costs would rise if they wanted adequate security in the district offices. (The safety of public officials has been a topic of conversation this month after Gonzalez announced he would be taking a break from riding public transit after he was “accosted” by a woman on a TriMet bus about his politics. He asked for “a security solution to these targeted attacks.”)

Sauter asked what level of security was acceptable for elected officials in district offices. “Essentially, what do you want to leave these new entrants with? Do you want them to just

have a card table at the Kenton Firehouse," Sauter said on Tuesday, "or do you want them to have a facility that has the same level of security assuredness that you have downtown?"

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Portland City Council members may just have 1 staffer each in 2025

By Alex Zielinski (OPB)

Feb. 12, 2024 11:27 a.m.

According to a draft budget document, the city is considering having just one employee for each City Council member in the new government. A volunteer committee tasked with advising the government transition says that is a bad idea.

Portland is entering a historic new chapter in city government with an increasingly light wallet. Those tasked with overseeing the government change are now concerned that the city's budget shortfalls could hinder its ability to start its next chapter off right.

The concern lies in staffing. A draft budget plan shows that, in the newly expanded council of 12 people, elected members will only be allowed a single staff member.

Currently, Portland City Council members have between six and seven staff each.

Portland City Hall, September, 2022.

MacGregor Campbell / OPB

Portland City Council is set to triple in size starting in January 2025, following a November election where all 12 new positions, along with the mayor and auditor, are on the ballot. Under this voter-approved makeover, City Council members will no longer oversee city bureaus but serve as more traditional legislators representing geographic districts and proposing city policy.

A letter sent to the City Council by the Government Transition Advisory Committee, which advises the council on the government transition, described the proposed staffing as "inadequate."

"With the shifting roles in the new form of government, individual councilors will need support for both legislative policy-making and budgetary analysis and adoption, now solely the council's responsibility," the letter reads. "Furthermore, the new districted governance must staff and support constituent service and community engagement for each councilor."

The committee didn't suggest how many staff each council member should be granted.

They did, however, point to an ordinance passed by Portland City Council in November, which laid out a tentative staffing plan for the new council, where each council office is assigned two employees. But, by the end of that month, the council had approved a spending plan by the City Budget Office that only funded one council staffer per office.

The initial two-person staffing plan was recommended by city staff who oversee the government transition in the Office of Management and Finance. Christine Llobregat, a spokesperson for the transition project, said she believes the City Council approved a plan with a downsized proposal to cut costs.

The city is entering budget discussions for the coming fiscal year in the red. With $2 million in revenue shortfalls, Mayor Ted Wheeler is requiring most city bureaus to cut their annual budgets by 5%. This mandate could hinder any hopes of expanding staffing on the new council, at least for the new government's first year.

In a GTAC meeting last week, city staff said the proposed budget for council offices only includes enough money for one employee. City financial analyst Ben Smith said the draft budget ensures that a single council staffer could receive an annual salary that stretches anywhere from $82,000 to $124,000.

That budget allows for five employees in the incoming mayor's office. Mayor Ted Wheeler currently has 17 employees. Wheeler, who said he's dedicating his final year in office to ensuring the incoming City Council is set up for success, told OPB that it's too early in the budget process to comment on any proposal.

The City Council will discuss the new council's administrative costs at a Thursday work session. They will vote to approve the city's final budget in June.

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THE Skanner
CHALLENGING PEOPLE TO SHAPE A BETTER FUTURE NOW

Portland Government Will Change On Jan. 1. The City's Transition Team Explains What We Can Expect.

GTAC co-chair Destiny Magaña-Pablo visited the Urban League of Portland to give an educational presentation about changes to city government. (Photo/Courtesy City of Portland)

By Saundra Sorenson

Published: 02 May 2024

In the city's history, only three commissioners have lived east of 82nd Avenue.

The region that houses nearly a third of the city's population is increasingly home to Portlanders displaced by gentrification and soaring housing costs. With a new, voter-approved change to city charter that will take effect next year, East Portland will be known as District 1 – and it will be guaranteed three representatives on city council.

GTAC co-chair Destiny Magaña Pablo (Courtesy City of Portland)"

GTAC co-chair Zach Kearl (Courtesy City of Portland)

What that means in a government space with budgeting, with services, with just dialogue and discourse, is going to be monumental," Destiny Magaña-Pablo, co-chair of the city's Government Transition Advisory Committee, told *The Skanner*. "Not just in terms of racial, ethnic and religious backgrounds, but values and priorities."

Magaña-Pablo and co-chair Zach Kearl call the transition "a learning curve that everyone has to be intentional about." Currently, Portland has the dubious distinction of being the last large American city to run on a commission form of local government, where city

commissioners and the mayor share both legislative and administrative duties. The four city commissioners also represent the city as a whole, making the campaigning process more broad and expensive.

Next year, the mayor will take on executive duties with a new city administrator, who will take over bureau management. The mayor will not have veto power over city council decisions, but would cast tie-breaking votes as needed.

Currently, each council member is assigned to oversee city bureaus.

“There are added efficiencies in removing the political nature of commissioners overseeing certain bureaus,” Kearl, who holds a master of public administration from the University of Washington, told *The Skanner*. “When you need a lot of collaboration, it would require this kind of political dialogue that from my personal experience in city hall can really be challenging. You need to create alignment and create policies that we know from evidence-based practices are best suited for solving the problem in the city.”

Still, Kearl urges patience.

“I want to caveat everything: It’s not going to be different Jan. 1, 2025,” he said.

“That’s part of our community education effort: Yes, you voted in a brand new council, but that new council in large part will have to learn new roles and responsibilities, they may be first-time electeds, and there’s growing management. The city is having to reconfigure how it works in this new form…

But from a decision-making (stance), and how policy is developed and budgets are approved, we’re going to anticipate that shift in the next calendar year. So there’s going to be some learning. I think we need to give this process some grace in knowing that two years of a transition is remarkably fast to enact something so transformational.”

Studying The Landscape

The 15-member Government Transition Advisory Committee (GTAC) is one of three volunteer bodies helping implement the change to government that voters approved in November 2022. The Independent District Commission submitted its proposed map of four distinct city districts last August, and the Salary Commission looked to market rates to determine what are considered “public sector thriving wage” rates for the mayor ($175,463), the city auditor ($168,758) and each council member ($133,207).

With additional representatives, the city council will need to adjust how it operates.

“In our recommendations, we’re identifying committees,” Kearl said.

“So rather than having all 12 members on the dais discussing every single nook and cranny of policy across the city, we’re recommending certain policy areas in which a smaller group of councilors can get together, hear public comment and deliberate on policy they can then elevate to the full group for the authorization of future policy – similar to how state legislation works (at the state level).”

GTAC looked to similarly-sized cities with comparable budgets and similar structures, like Minneapolis and San Antonio, as case studies.

“Every city has treated districts and representing themselves within the districts differently,” Kearl said.

With three representatives to a district, Magaña-Pablo said voters and non-voting constituents will likely see their priorities better reflected on the city council.

“Some of us haven’t seen commissioners and mayors outside of central downtown,” she said.

“The diversity of needs and wants in the community are going to show up a lot more, then also with (more diverse) religious, racial, ethnic backgrounds, also income backgrounds, the multiple beliefs that the city needs to acknowledge will most likely be able to actually shine in the city. And I think that’s actually going to also increase community engagement.”

She added, “Also I think the priorities as a city will hopefully become more unified.”

Voters will cast their ballots for district representatives in November, but already, Kearl said he’s seen many more candidates declaring their intent to run than in races past.

“It’s taxing our small grants program in a very great way – we’re getting a lot of new candidates,” he said. He seconded the notion that district-specific campaigning should speak more directly to constituents’ needs.

GTAC member Jose Gamero-Georgeson meets with the Multnomah Youth Commission to give an educational presentation about changes to city government. (Courtesy City of Portland)

"We do youth presentations, and they're very much like, 'I don't see a future forward,'" Magaña-Pablo said. "Or, 'I don't see the things I care about being talked about.'…So when you have civic leaders finally having the opportunity to be civic leaders, I think it encourages the community that they have behind them, it encourages neighbors behind them."

Community Presence

Being district-specific will also give city commissioners the opportunity to be more physically present in their community.

"Some cities might have in-district offices that are really a jumping-off point for in-district events," Kearl said. "Some might be more of a community space that has city services. And so we took all that information in, knowing to a certain extent it really is dependent upon what the city and Portlanders want."

GTAC asked the city's facilities services to identify potential low-cost venues for offices in each district, although not every district had what the city was looking for, Magaña-Pablo.

“I think it’s something that might look different in every district – some might not need it, some might,” she added. “So I think that just needs more community and councilor engagement.”

Excitement In The Air?

While some – including, perhaps, the nearly 42% of voters who did not support the measure — might view the administrative change as a logistical headache, members of the GTAC team see the transition as transformative.

“The most exciting thing for me is just a renaissance of city engagement, and an opportunity to shape what the city does,” Kearl said.

“It’s been a really great experience for me. I served in the mayor’s office from 2019 to 2021, and to have a constructive, generative conversation about what government looks like is something I certainly didn’t have on the mayor’s staff; I’ve never really experienced it as a citizen or a member of a community. And so this is really a pretty cool opportunity to not just cast your vote but also get involved in actual events and raise your voice in idealizing what you want in a city.”

One of GTAC’s focuses has been reaching out to those who have historically been marginalized by the grind of city government, including the BIPOC community.

“With voter education on charter transition, it also is a call to action,” Magaña-Pablo said. “Like, you’ve given us your feedback, you know our names, we’re creating this community that’s happening at this real time – hold us accountable at the end of it.”

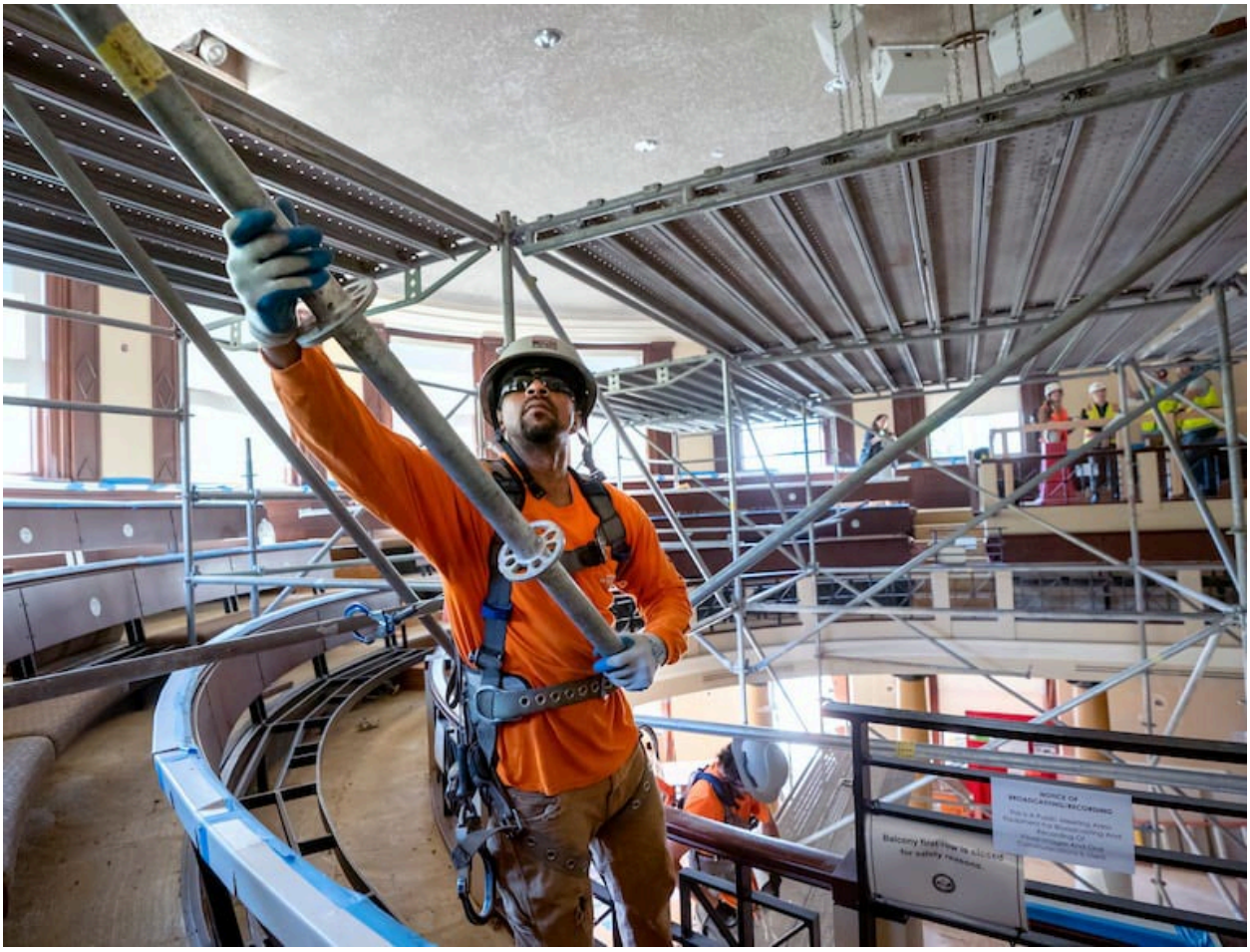
For more information about the city’s transition to a new form of government, including district maps and timelines, visit portland.gov/transition.

Portland City Hall's major makeover is underway

By Alex Zielinski (OPB)

May 15, 2024 2:47 p.m.

The place where Portland City Council meets and votes will look much different in the coming months.



Syhean Osby of Northwest Scaffold Service, Inc., erects scaffolding in the council chambers at Portland City Hall, May 15, 2024. Construction crews are renovating the chambers to accommodate the expanded 12-person council, as approved by voters in 2022.

Kristyna Wentz-Graff / OPB

A window provides a look into the construction underway at Portland City Hall, May 15, 2024. Construction crews are renovating the chambers to accommodate the expanded 12-person council, as approved by voters in 2022.

Kristyna Wentz-Graff / OPB

Blueprints and a worker's gloves, at the construction site in Portland City Hall, May 15, 2024. Construction crews are renovating the council chambers to accommodate the expanded 12-person council, as approved by voters in 2022.

Kristyna Wentz-Graff / OPB

Caitlin McGehee, project manager, on a tour of the construction site in Portland City Hall, May 15, 2024. Construction crews are renovating the council chambers to accommodate the expanded 12-person council, as approved by voters in 2022.

Kristyna Wentz-Graff / OPB

The entire project to renovate city council chambers in Portland City Hall is estimated to cost up to $8 million. Workers are replacing the council table with a much larger, semi-circular dais with space for 12 council members, the mayor and other council staffers.

Kristyna Wentz-Graff / OPB

Portland City Council is temporarily holding their weekly meetings in a city building on Southwest 4th Avenue until construction is complete. Construction crews are renovating the city council chambers in Portland City Hall, May 14, 2024, to accommodate the expanded 12-person council, as approved by voters in 2022.

Kristyna Wentz-Graff / OPB

Construction crews are renovating the city council chambers in Portland City Hall, May 14, 2024, to accommodate the expanded 12-person council, as approved by voters in 2022. The council chambers were last remodeled in the early 90s.

Kristyna Wentz-Graff / OPB

Construction crews are renovating the city council chambers in Portland City Hall, May 14, 2024, to accommodate the expanded 12-person council, as approved by voters in 2022. The gutted chambers are now filled with scaffolding, allowing workers to reach the ceiling to replace light fixtures and apply a new coat of paint.

Kristyna Wentz-Graff / OPB

Construction crews are renovating the city council chambers in Portland City Hall, May 14, 2024, to accommodate the expanded 12-person council, as approved by voters in 2022. The gutted chambers are now filled with scaffolding, allowing workers to reach the ceiling to replace light fixtures and apply a new coat of paint.

Kristyna Wentz-Graff / OPB

Construction crews are renovating the city council chambers in Portland City Hall, May 14, 2024, to accommodate the expanded 12-person council, as approved by voters in 2022. Some of the existing pillars will be removed.

Kristyna Wentz-Graff / OPB

Construction crews are renovating the city council chambers in Portland City Hall, May 14, 2024, to accommodate the expanded 12-person council, as approved by voters in 2022. The council table has been removed, along with wall behind the dais.

Kristyna Wentz-Graff / OPB

A window provides a look into the construction inside the chambers. Construction crews are renovating the city council chambers in Portland City Hall, May 14, 2024, to accommodate the expanded 12-person council, as approved by voters in 2022.

Kristyna Wentz-Graff / OPB

A large calendar targets dates for the project. Construction crews are renovating the city council chambers in Portland City Hall, May 14, 2024, to accommodate the expanded 12-person council, as approved by voters in 2022.

Kristyna Wentz-Graff / OPB

A window in the upper level of the city council chambers has been converted to a doorway. Construction crews are renovating the city council chambers in Portland City Hall, May 14, 2024, to accommodate the expanded 12-person council, as approved by voters in 2022.

Kristyna Wentz-Graff / OPB

City council is temporarily holding their weekly meetings in a city building on Southwest 4th Avenue until construction is complete. Construction crews are renovating the city council chambers in Portland City Hall, May 14, 2024, to accommodate the expanded 12-person council, as approved by voters in 2022.

Kristyna Wentz-Graff / OPB

Construction crews are renovating the city council chambers in Portland City Hall, May 14, 2024, to accommodate the expanded 12-person council, as approved by voters in 2022. A window on the second floor was converted to a temporary doorway.

Kristyna Wentz-Graff / OPB

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Portland City Council Chambers are used to noise. But instead of grandstanding politicians or chanting protesters, the sound of heavy construction is filling the room this week.

Construction crews are tearing down walls, ripping out carpet, and dismantling electronics to prepare council chambers for its next chapter. In November, Portlanders will elect 12 people to serve on city council — three times larger than its current body — as part of the voter-approved plan to reconfigure the city's form of government. And those new officials will need somewhere to sit when they start work on Jan. 1.

Workers are replacing the council table with a much larger, semi-circular dais with space for 12 council members, the mayor, and other council staffers. They are also removing all outdated technology in the room — a long overdue process.

Maty Sauter, who oversees the city's asset management department, said the council chambers were last remodeled in the 1990s. "So there's been a lot of evolution in security infrastructure and audio visual infrastructure since then," she said.

Demolition began last week. The original council table is gone and the wall behind the dais has been reduced to a pile of metal framing studs. The gutted chambers are now filled with scaffolding, allowing workers to reach the ceiling to replace light fixtures and apply a new coat of paint. They're working fast, thanks to the unusually swift timeframe.

Sauter said her office had begun planning to update the electronics in council chambers five years ago, but two unexpected factors forced them to change course: the COVID-19 pandemic, which brought new technology needs to City Hall to accommodate for hybrid work, and the 2022 ballot measure that expanded the size of council.

"We knew as soon as the election happened that we were going to have to be responsive to that," Sauter said.

The city began meeting with architects and construction teams shortly after the November 2022 election, and began ordering specialty items, mostly electronics, that they knew could take more than a year to come in.

The work goes beyond just council chambers. Construction workers will also need to remodel city council offices and the mayor's office by the end of the year to make space for the expanded staff. This process has been bumpy: Last year, several City Council members pushed back on a plan drafted by Sauter to move their offices out of City Hall in early 2024, to allow for construction. After a heated debate, commissioners agreed to stay in their current offices until July, giving workers just six months to renovate their offices.

Sauter said construction workers will begin working on those offices in late July. And, she added, tensions between commissioners and her office over this plan have lessened.

"I think overall, there was not enough communication with the council offices about what impact this would have on them," she said. "But I would say ever since then, we've forged a much more direct relationship with council offices, and it's a much more collaborative relationship now."

The city has authorized spending up to $8 million on the renovation. This was funded in the current fiscal year budget, which began in July 2023. Sauter said that the upcoming budget, which council votes on this week, has no impact on the construction work.

Related: Portland commissioners want to overhaul voter-approved changes to city government

But there's one unfunded plan still up in the air: District offices. The new councilors will represent residents of four different geographic districts instead of the entire city. Current city council members proposed creating secondary offices for each new council member in their district, but the city paused that plan because of disagreements about which buildings to use and how to staff them.

Sauter said it wasn't prudent to make that decision now and said the new council will address that issue.

City council is temporarily holding their weekly meetings in a city building on Southwest 4th Avenue until construction is complete. In July, all commissioners and the mayor will move their offices into other city buildings.

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KGW's **The Story**

Portland official, tapped to be city administrator, sets a course for 2025 government overhaul

Author: Pat Dooris, Jamie Parfitt

Published: 6:11 PM PDT May 17, 2024

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PORTLAND, Ore. — With Portland set to undergo a political transformation first thing next year, Mayor Ted Wheeler has been pushing hard to put as many of the pieces in place as possible ahead of time. He's picked the city's chief administrative officer, Michael Jordan, to take on the role of city administrator in this mock-up of the new administration.

Jordan has made abundantly clear that while he's committed to facilitating this transition, he does not want to be Portland city administrator for any longer than he has to be. That said, he may be doing the lion's share of the work before his permanent replacement comes along and takes the reins.

What charter reform hath wrought

Portland voters approved the change-up in November 2022, agreeing to alter the city's form of government for the first time since 1913.

Under the old system, four city commissioners and the mayor are responsible for creating policy, but they also oversee the day-to-day operations of multiple city bureaus and their hundreds of employees. That makes for a fairly big job for each elected official, people who do not necessarily have any experience in public administration or the portfolios they're placed over, and with millions of dollars on the line.

Over time, just about everyone now seems to agree, this commission-style system resulted in the bureaus becoming siloed — resulting in poor communication and cooperation. City staff were only really beholden to the commissioner in charge of their bureau, rather than the mayor or the government as a whole.

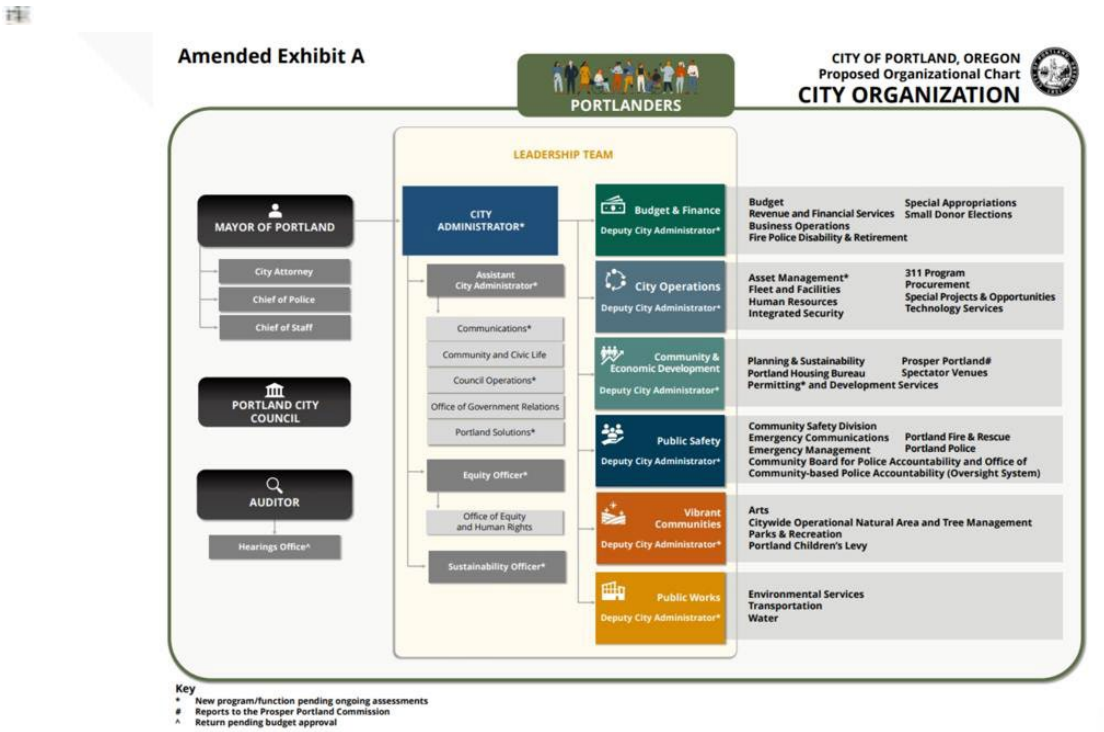
As the city grew, Portland's city bureaucracy became more disjointed, cumbersome and often ineffective.

Under the new system passed by voters, city commissioners will focus only on creating and passing policy. They'll be entirely hands-off with the city departments. Instead, a professional city manager will take over the administration, assisted by six deputies.

The existing 33 bureaus and offices will be consolidated into just six areas. The mayor, meanwhile, will be charged with overseeing the administration, with the power to hire and fire the city manager and police chief.

City commissioner ranks will expand to 12, or three people each from four quadrants of the city. They'll be elected in November and take office at the beginning of January 2025.

However, consolidation of city bureaus is supposed to happen July 1 as the current government attempts to transition into the overall shape of what it will be next year. While the current city commissioners will still technically be in charge, deputy city managers will begin to run the six different departments under the direction of the interim city manager, Michael Jordan.



Credit: City of Portland

An org chart for Portland's post-reform government structure, which does away with the old commission-style format.

The city that permits

The transition will coincide with Portland's new budget, which begins July 1. Jordan told The Story's Pat Dooris that this gives the city something like a six-month runway to get this new form of government off the ground.

"On July 1 we'll, for lack of a better term, begin practicing how the city will operate in the future under a new mayor and a new city council in January of '25," Jordan said. "We've got a lot of questions to answer that are kind of the next level of detail questions. The thing that the council adopted back in November is really a large framework for the whole city. But a bunch of detailed questions are buried in that framework that need to be answered in the next cycle of change."

Getting even that overall framework through Portland City Council was a fraught process, and the battles continue. As Willamette Week reported, Commissioners Carmen Rubio and Mingus Mapps were recently at odds, as both oversee bureaus that handle permitting. Under the new system, they'll all be under one umbrella — and they'd arguably have been consolidated even without charter reform due to long-running complaints about Portland's byzantine permitting process.

Mapps wanted to slow the consolidation process due to concerns from people in his bureaus who felt it wasn't clear who they'd be reporting to, he said. Rubio flatly refused.

According to Jordan, this consolidation is an example of the kind of change that needs to happen in city government.

"It is a little awkward, but it's also an example of the kinds of examination of how we do business that I think will be easier to do under the new structure, where you'll have one person that's kind of accountable to the whole thing and one place where the buck stops," he said. "This work we've done at restructuring permitting, that goes into effect also July 1, it involves seven different bureaus reporting to all five different commissioners. And so trying to manage that kind of change with very fragmented leadership at the very top, it presents its own set of complications. Let's put it that way.

"In the future, when we do things like that, we'll just have one city administrator that will be calling the shot, and there may be multiple deputies involved, but they're all accountable to that one city administrator who's ultimately accountable to the mayor also."

There are reasons why the permitting process was so divided in the first place. When someone applies for a development permit, Jordan explained, the Portland Fire Bureau is in charge of life and safety and the Water Bureau naturally handles water. Environmental Services deals with storm drainage and environmental review, while the old Bureau of Development Services dealt with state building code and inspections.

Each bureau has a singular focus, so it made a certain kind of sense for each to oversee the permitting under their purview. But that structure created a lengthy gauntlet that developers need to run for any single project, throwing up roadblocks all over the place.

"It's been recognized for decades," Jordan said of the permitting problems. "But this commission ... it's laudable that this commission, with four of them running for office and all of the things that that comes with, they've been very focused on changing this permitting process and getting all the people involved in a building permit working in one bureau with a single director accountable to all of those issues."

It won't necessarily be smooth sailing from here on, Jordan admitted. Bundling permits creates other potential issues. Regardless, the idea is that the city will be more responsive to the needs of everyone, particularly the folks who aren't experienced with navigating a bureaucracy like this.

"We have had, historically, a lot of people who do development in the city, that do it all the time, and they've got attorneys and they've got planners and they've got engineers that do this stuff for them, and they understand the process," Jordan said. "But I think the people we struggle with the most are mom and pop, who want to expand their business and they'll do it once in their life. And they don't know anything about this process and we have to find a way to get them through what can be a very convoluted set of decisions that have to be made."

Most permits the city gets are of the "mom and pop" kind, Jordan added, so the city needs to be attentive to what they need.

Trimming the fat

Once the city siloes are knocked down, Jordan and others in this interim administration will be trying to figure out where the inefficiencies are. Partly, that will entail looking for redundancies — and some jobs may be going away because of it.

As an example, Jordan said that each of the city bureaus have grown their own in-house communications teams due to the fact that they're not sharing notes. All told, he thinks there are at least 80 people doing this kind of work throughout the city.

First, they'll need to figure out how these communications teams can integrate and start working together.

"We have probably 20, maybe more comms folks in public works, in the three big infrastructure bureaus — transportation water and sewer — and none in budget and finance," Jordan said. "That's just an example of, maybe we need to think about the distribution of those resources. Also, consolidating them under one authority, one person

allows us to move resource more fluidly. Say we have a communications crisis thing to manage in one of the bureaus, and they don't have the capacity. We can move people and say, 'OK, next three months you're working over here, and you need to manage this issue.' And so we struggle with the fluidity of how to apply human resources."

Jordan said he's not here to propose layoffs, but he expects that some vacant positions may get eliminated as people retire or leave for other jobs. That'll be part of a long-term effort to "right-size" the new city government.

But, Jordan acknowledges, this will be a process of discovery. He's been the city's chief administrative officer, and that isn't the same as a city manager. He knows the Office of Management Finance, his department, but he doesn't know the transportation, fire, police or parks bureaus anywhere near as well.

"We're gonna find out a lot with each other. We're gonna do this together," he said. "It won't just be the six (deputy) city administrators. We will work with the directors of bureaus, and then we'll also have to work with those subject matter experts. Depending on what the discipline is, whether it's comms or equity or whatever. And we'll work with those people and bureaus, and we'll get a good sense of, 'OK, what do you do? How much time does it take? What's the volume of work,' all those kinds of things, and then start to think about, 'OK, let's start to think about how we right-size and how we apply human resource in the best way possible.'"

Harvard Kennedy School Ash Center Case Study May 30, 2024

From Crisis to Opportunity: How the City of Portland Embraced Democratic Innovation

In this case study of democratic innovation at the local level, the authors answer the questions: Why, in 2022, was voting representation and democratic reform firmly on Portland's agenda? Did this shift contribute to Portlanders passing Measure 26-228?

By:

- Archon Fung
- Nick Chedli Carter

-

Portland, Oregon recently passed Measure 26-228, which represents some of the most expansive voting reforms by a major American city in recent history. Instead of being elected in at-large districts, members of the Portland City Council will be selected from four multi-member districts, through ranked choice voting. This expands the number of City Council members from four to twelve.

This is a case study of democratic innovation at the local level. Portland adopted its "commission" form of government in 1913. Between 1917 and 2007, seven ballot initiatives attempted to reform this governance structure; however, they tended to focus on strengthening mayoral power rather than enhancing democratic representation and expanding voting rights. At the core of this case study is the question: Why, in 2022, was voting representation and democratic reform firmly on the agenda? Did this shift contribute to Portlanders passing Measure 26-228?

This analysis highlights the interplay between institutional structures and political agency. The opportunity for these reforms came from a permissive political environment, characterized by the widespread perception that Portland was "broken" alongside a broader context of racial reckoning amid the protest wave triggered by the murder of George Floyd. As the decennial charter review process commenced in late 2020, there was consensus across the spectrum on the need for governance reform. However, it was the Charter Review Commission that proposed the bundle of reforms included in Measure 26-228. This sparked opposition from local political elites and the business community, who were primarily concerned with strengthening the position of mayor. The authors identify a process of network building and community organizing that, at each stage of the reform process, proved critical to developing and passing the reform initiative.

This process was precipitated by a coalition of community organizations, local activists, and leaders, often connected to people of color, that acted as the key agents in the reform process. This, in and of itself, is a significant factor. In the authors' view, it is relatively unusual for these types of organizations to successfully mobilize public support and pass reforms in the face of opposition from local political and business leaders.

The Ash Center for Democratic Governance and Innovation develops ideas and fosters practices for equal and inclusive, multiracial and multiethnic democracy and self-government.

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04-29-2025 2:08 pm

THE Skanner
CHALLENGING PEOPLE TO SHAPE A BETTER FUTURE NOW

Ranked-Choice Voting Expert Grace Ramsey on What Portland Voters Can Expect in November

A person drops off a vote-by-mail ballot at a dropbox in Pioneer Square during primary voting on Tuesday, May 21, 2024, in Portland, Ore. (AP Photo/Jenny Kane)

By Saundra Sorenson

Published: 06 June 2024

Portland voters will elect the city's next mayor and city commissioners in November, with no room for run-off races. That's because Portland joins a growing number of cities and

states in the U.S. to adopt ranked-choice voting, where voters have the opportunity to list not only their first choice in candidate, but also present a list of their backup choices.

National ranked-choice voting expert Grace Ramsey.

It may seem daunting at first, but as national ranked-choice voting expert Grace Ramsey explains, it's an intuitive process we often use in other areas of our lives. And ranked-choice voting, she says, has the potential to shake up previous systems of influence and better empower voters to draw attention to issues – while doing away with the idea that a voter is ever throwing away a vote on an unlikely candidate whom they strongly support.

Ramsey has worked in voter education about ranked-choice voting for more than a decade, and has worked in communities and states that are introducing ranked-choice voting for the first time – places like Alaska, Maine, San Francisco, New York City and Minneapolis, to name a few. She took a break from working with the city on its voter outreach to speak with The Skanner. Interview has been edited for length and clarity.

How does ranked-choice voting benefit voters?

I live in Washington, D.C., where I don't have ranked-choice voting. And I see really crowded fields in our elections. There's a lot of people with ideas for what we want to do in our city and how we want to change things. When I go to vote and there's that long list, I am overwhelmed sometimes with the fact that I can only say, I have to pick whichever one's best. That doesn't always mean 100% in line with my issues, it means I want my voice to be heard and I don't want to waste my vote.

With ranked-choice voting, that idea of wasting your vote is gone.

Because even if the candidate you like best can't win, if they just don't have enough support, those back-up choices you have by ranking a second, third and so on choice, mean you still get to have a voice and you still get to have a say.

So in Portland we'll have six choices, so you can say 'This candidate is my favorite, if I can't have this candidate, this one's my next choice,' and so on. It can make a lot of difference to voters.

How does this benefit BIPOC voters?

The way I see it is one, oftentimes communities can be kind of stuck in geographic areas at times and ranked-choice voting kind of breaks that down so it's not (the case that) one neighborhood in a part of the city that's running the show. I found that in Minneapolis, especially in citywide races. In Minneapolis, the southwest side of the city tends to be older, Whiter and wealthier, and with an August primary followed by a November general election, often southwest would decide who got in that general election. With ranked-choice voting, we saw candidates have to pay attention to the north side, have to pay attention to the northeast side, to the south side. It's not that they completely ignored those before but they weren't as much of a source of being players in what was going to happen.

When we talk about the approach to city council here, voters can really band together and be a force.

Their voice needs to be heard, and with that 25%-plus-one (of the vote) that a candidate needs to win a seat in city council, I think that's an opportunity for communities to really say 'Hey, these are our needs. If you're not going to be responsive to them in this campaign process, we have a lot of choices, and we will use our power to support folks who represent our views and our values.'

What changes do you observe once an area has implemented ranked-choice?

Every location is so unique. What I found is a lot of the places that are exploring this are ones where our sort of traditional system works really well when there are limited choices. If there are two candidates, our existing system works great. But I've found that what a lot of these places have in common is there are more voices than just two. There are more people stepping forward. And so people want more choice. But they don't want those choices to then make them have to do political calculus, right? I've found that these

systems work really well in those places, and it seems like Portland is pretty in line with that in terms of a lot of folks stepping forward with a vision for their community.

How does this benefit the candidates?

For candidates, you think about voters differently. I know candidates who, in a traditional election when they go out to knock on doors, if they see the yard sign for a candidate that's running in their race, they'll never go and knock on that door because that voter already made their choice and why would they waste their time? With ranked-choice voting, you do want to go and knock on the door and you want to say, 'Oh, you support this candidate? Great! We're aligned on these three issues, we're not aligned on these two issues, but I really think I would be a good second choice for you if you're supporting that candidate.' And how different of a conversation is that?

Have you run into logistical issues or confusion when it comes time for voting?

There's always that fear. I have found everywhere I've worked, voters step up to the plate and they find this process pretty intuitive. That's largely because the thought process itself is actually something we do all the time. People use this example a lot: If I go to the grocery store and I want a pint of ice cream, and they don't have Ben & Jerry's Phish Food, I'll be upset, but I'm still going to get ice cream because I want ice cream – but my second-favorite Ben & Jerry's flavor.

When we're doing voter education, our job is to take that knowledge people already have in their lived experience and just apply it to a new situation.

Can you break down how ranked-choice votes are counted?

If we're electing one person, like mayor or auditor, voters rank their preferences and to count the votes, we start by only looking at voters' first choices. So those backups don't mean anything at first. If a candidate has more than half of the votes, they win. So you need at least half the votes to win because only one candidate can do that.

Ranked-choice voting comes into it if no one has more than half of the votes.

Then we'd eliminate the candidate with the fewest votes. The voters who selected that candidate as their first choice would instantly have their vote go to their next choice, and

then we would ask the same questions: Does anyone have more than half of the vote? And we'd repeat that process going until someone has more than half of the votes.

For city council it's a little different, because we're electing more than one person. The number of votes you need to win depends on how many people we're electing. With one winner, you need more than half of the votes because only one person can get more than half. With three winners, you need more than a quarter of the votes, because only three people can do that.

Do you think voters are more comfortable casting that first-choice vote for a less-known candidate knowing that their fallbacks are going to be considered?

One hundred percent. I think that's a major change, and for those candidates who – how many times have you heard 'Why is this person even in the race? They have no chance. They're just going to pull votes from this person.' With ranked-choice voting, that's not happening anymore. And so one thing I've been excited to see is that it eliminates that "wait your turn" for candidates, and it allows people to step up. It really does.

So much is changing in the world and so quickly, and I think people are really starting to organize and build their power in community. But it is linked, I think. So there are these factors here of allowing people to step up and run without it being this zero-sum game where if one candidate does well, it harms another. In this situation, it may be a first-time candidate, it may be a young person, they can step forward, give their vision for the city, and the voters who respond to it can vote for them and maybe they don't do huge numbers, but it is a good indicator of what people care about, and those people are not throwing away their vote by taking a chance.

I think of (city council candidate) Phillippe Cunningham in Minneapolis, Ward 4, who unseated an incumbent who had been in office for quite a while. There were three candidates in the race, and he and the other candidate who were younger and both people of color, banded together and said 'We need a change in Ward 4, we feel like it's not as in touch with what's going on as it used to be,' and Philippe won largely due to ranked-choice voting. He is also a younger trans man who just put themselves out there to really give a vision for the city that is forward-thinking and really progressive. I think that campaign was really interesting in how he engaged with the system, but how the community really got to make a decision about what their priorities were.

There are a lot of stories like that of people who, under the old system, may have been overlooked or may not have had the favor of a lot of the people who can kind of shine light

on certain candidates. But when you see they really have power in the community, that's where I think it's amazing.

For more information about the city's use of ranked-choice, and for examples of how the next ballot will look, visit portland.gov/vote/ranked-choice-voting.

Harvard Kennedy School Ash Center Case Study Feature Jun 26, 2024

How Portland, Oregon Embraced Voting Reform — and Democratic Innovation

Portland, Oregon passed one of the most progressive voting reforms in the country. Max Kiefel, Nick Chedli Carter, and Archon Fung explore the motivating factors behind this big change.

By: Dana Guterman

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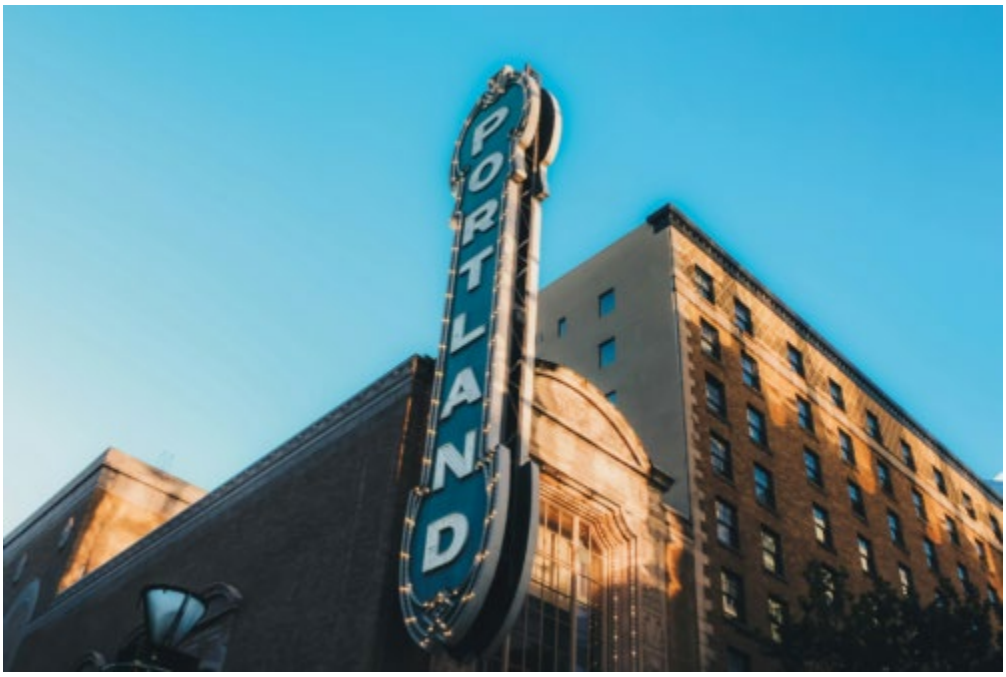


In 2022, amid a cultural shift and a barrage of sensationalist headlines, Portland, Oregon passed some of the most expansive voting reforms by a major American city in recent history. Measure 26-228 revised the city's charter, expanding the number of City Council members from four to twelve and electing them in four multi-member districts rather than at-large districts. Additionally, it introduced ranked choice voting and a professional city administrator. These changes aimed to diversify representation and ensure a more equitable distribution of power across the city. "These reforms were both significant and

surprising, representing the city's most fundamental changes in over a century," note Max Kiefel, Nick Chedli Carter, and Archon Fung in a newly published case study examining Portland's innovative approach to charter reform.

Using articles, meeting minutes, reports, and interviews, Kiefel, Carter, and Fung document the reform process for scholars, elected officials, and advocates while seeking to answer the question: why now? Between 1907 and 2007, there were at least seven ballot initiatives aimed at reforming Portland's commission governance structure. They all failed, often focusing more on consolidating mayoral power rather than improving democratic processes. "Why then, in 2022, was voting representation and democratic reform firmly on the agenda, and did this contribute to Portland finally voting for change?" ask the authors.

On one hand, the authors found that Portland's government was overdue for change. Portland, Oregon is a progressive city where nearly 74% of the population is white. Until recently, the City Council, too, was overwhelmingly made up of white men. Many attributed this lack of representation to its government structure; before Measure 26-228 passed, Portland was the only city in America retaining the commission form of government. The system led to a host of problems, including poor coordination, a lack of long-term planning, and general inefficiencies. In addition, many were concerned that the commission form was more amenable to advantaged citizens.

Against this backdrop, Portland found itself in a unique situation in 2022. It had just emerged from some of the most stringent COVID-19 restrictions in the country, and the city's intense protests in the wake of George Floyd's murder had led to "a widespread perception that Portland was 'broken.'" At the same time, the city was approaching its second decennial charter review process, requiring the City Council to convene a Charter Review Commission. The process "provided a readymade institution to enable the willing to engage in reform."

The authors found that this broader political and structural context primed Portlanders to vote for democratic reform in 2022 and "created a permissive environment for issues of minority representation and voting rights to feature prominently in any reform proposals." However, " ... this does not necessarily explain why earlier attempts at charter reform lacked the scope of proposals in Measure 26-228." While the 2020-2022 Charter Review Commission proposed the specific reforms that were included in Measure 26-228, the authors credit a broad coalition of grassroots organizations, minority communities advocating for better representation, and progressive activists with developing the reforms and priming Portlanders to embrace them.

In fact, advocates and activists initiated critical organizing efforts as early as 2014, then leveraged years of advocacy and community organizing to build momentum for reform, despite facing opposition from established political figures and business interests. “Their organizing efforts proved valuable in building sufficient pressure to resist opponents’ attempts to stymie the reform before and after the public vote … Specifically, they identified the Charter Review Commission as an opportunity to influence city reform by positioning themselves and allies to influence the commission’s agenda once appointed.” While the timing was right for Measure 26-228, the authors believe that it would not have passed in its current form without a concerted effort and long-term commitment from key community members.

While the timing was right for Measure 26-228, the authors believe that it would not have passed in its current form without a concerted effort and long-term commitment from key community members.

Dana Guterman

At the time of the case study’s publication, Portland had passed the reforms and was in the process of implementing them. In the months and years ahead, these changes will play out. Time will tell if the reforms are “successful” and, if so, what other cities can learn from Portland’s charter reform experience “as they look to introduce voter reforms that arguably deepen the democratic character of local government institutions.”

###

City introduces deputy administrators ahead of Portland government transition

Next week, the City of Portland takes another step towards a new form of city government.

By Karli Olson

Published: Jun. 27, 2024 at 5:52 PM PDT

PORTLAND Ore. (KPTV) - Next week, the City of Portland takes another step towards a new form of city government.

On Thursday, City leadership introduced a team of six 'Deputy City Administrators' who will be taking over various service areas that were previously run by City commissioners, starting July 1.

The change is part of the City's process of transitioning from a government system of four commissioners and the mayor to a system with 12 city councilors- in which councilors do not oversee any bureaus.

City leadership introduced Michael Jordan as the interim City Administrator, who will report directly to the mayor, and directly oversee the Deputy City Administrators.

Priya Dhanapal will serve as the Deputy City Administrator for Public Works. She previously served as the Public Works Deputy Director for Clark County, Washington.

Portland City Council met once again Wednesday to discuss the agreement with Multnomah County on how they handle homelessness in the region - but still no vote.

Donnie Oliveira will serve as the Deputy City Administrator for Community and Economic Development, which includes housing and permitting. His most recent role was as the City's Director of the Bureau of Planning and Sustainability.

Sonia Schmanski will serve as the Deputy City Administrator for Vibrant Communities, which includes Portland Parks and Recreation and the Office of Arts and Culture. Since 2022, she has served as the Deputy Chief Administrator Officer for the City.

Mike Myers will serve as the Deputy City Administrator for Public Safety, which covers emergency communications and 911, as well as the police and fire departments. He has acted as Portland's first community safety transition director for the last few years.

Sara Morrissey will be the Deputy City Administrator for City Operations, which includes human resources, fleet and facilities, and technology within the City. She has acted as Mayor Wheeler's Deputy Chief of Staff since 2021.

Jonas Biery will be the Deputy City Administrator for Budget and Finance and will be in charge of the City budget office, revenue and accounting, and managing grants. He worked with the City of Portland for nearly 10 years before becoming the Vice President at D.A. Davidson and Co. as a public finance banker and municipal advisor to local governments.

If you want to learn more about the individual officers, you can **visit the City's page here.**

"I can't think of a better way to finish a career than to be able to be a part of what I consider to be maybe the biggest governmental transformation in the state's history, not just the city's history," Jordan said.

SEE ALSO:

There was a big celebration on Wednesday as more shelter beds will soon be available to help address the homeless crisis in the North Portland area.

July 1 is still six months ahead of the official transition from the old form of government to the new, and until then, the role of commissioners is in limbo.

"They will no longer have day-to-day administrative authority [over the bureaus], but my presumption is they will continue to be heavily engaged in policy leadership as they concurrently do under the existing charter," Mayor Ted Wheeler said.

Mayor Wheeler added that if there are special projects the commissioners still want to engage in with their former bureaus, they can do so.

But after January 1, the new city councilor roles will be focused on directly serving the constituents who voted them into office.

Jordan says they've worked for the past couple of years to connect with similar-sized cities around the U.S. to get insight into how their government could operate.

"If you go to almost any big city in America that has been in their form of government for a while, you will find them organized pretty similarly," Jordan said. "We're moving from being an aberration in city government to being the norm."

"We can move away from our old and somewhat dysfunctional form of government," Wheeler added. "And we can move toward what I believe will prove to be one of the most effective local governments in the United States."

The new city councilors and mayor will be voted into office on Nov. 5, and their first city council meeting will be held on Jan. 2.

Portland 'soft launches' new government structure; here's who's running city services as of Monday

The city's bureaus have been reorganized into six service areas, each of which is run by an appointed deputy who reports to the interim city manager.

Author: Pat Dooris, KGW Staff

Published: 6:06 PM PDT July 1, 2024

Updated: 7:03 PM PDT July 1, 2024

PORTLAND, Ore. — Monday is a historic day in the city of Portland: the long-awaited "soft launch" of the brand new government structure that voters approved back in 2022. The official transition day is Jan. 1, 2025, when a whole new slate of elected officials will take office, and city officials will spend the rest of this year making sure everything is ready for those new leaders to take the reins.

"Today, we officially launch the six-month countdown to a new-to-Portland form of government, and take a crucial step in preparing for this historic change," interim city administrator Michael Jordan wrote in an email sent to city employees.

The "crucial step" is the reorganization of the city's bureaus into six new service areas, along with the appointment of a new team of deputy administrators to oversee them. This is what Portland's government will officially look like on Jan. 1, but Jordan convinced city leader to start experimenting six months early to work out any problems that pop up.

"Our north star for this project is setting up incoming elected officials and administration up for success," said Shoshanah Oppenheim, transition project manager for the city. "That we can build a culture of continuous improvement and that they will have the opportunity to make the next round of improvements to city operations."

Under Portland's old commission-style government, the mayor and four city commissioners directly oversee the city's day-to-day operations, with individual bureaus assigned to specific commissioners. The system was criticized as outdated and inefficient, leading to silos and a lack of cooperation between offices that fell under the purview of different commissioners.

Under the new system, the city council members — there will be 12 of them now — will take a more hands-off, policy-focused approach, leaving daily operations to a city

administrator appointed by the mayor. The administrator will in turn appoint and supervise six deputy administrators who oversee the service areas.

Credit: City of Portland

From left: Sonia Schmanski, Priya Dhanapal, Jonas Biery, Sara Morrissey, Donnie Oliveira, Mike Myers.

Since the next mayor won't take office until January, current mayor Ted Wheeler named Jordan as interim administrator during the transition. The city had already announced the deputy administrators:

- Jonas Biery is the deputy administrator for budget and finance, which will also make him the city's chief financial officer.
- Sara Morrissey is the deputy administrator for city operations, which she describes as the "backbone" of the government, providing services that help every bureau function.
- Mike Myers is the deputy administrator for public safety, which includes both police and fire.

- Sonia Schmanski is the deputy administrator for vibrant communities, which includes the office of arts and culture, the Portland Children's Levy, and Portland Parks and Recreation.
- Donnie Oliveira is the deputy administrator for community and economic development.
- Priya Dhanapal is the deputy administrator for public works.

All of these appointees are interim officeholders selected by current city commissioners or the mayor, and they can be replaced by whoever becomes the new city administrator in 2025. But for at least the next six months, they're the new team in charge of Portland's operations, all reporting to Jordan, who in turn still reports to Wheeler.

Jordan also announced on Monday that Annie Von Burg is now the interim assistant city administrator, handling handful of programs that don't fit neatly into the six service areas, including Portland Solutions, which is designed to focus on the issue of homelessness. Von Burg worked for the Bureau of Environmental Services and led the city's efforts to clean up the Willamette River for the past nine years.

Jordan said the goal for the next six months is simple: deliver an "effective, operating government" to the new elected officials who take office on Jan. 1 — though he acknowledges that things will be more complicated in practice, with "a lot of moving parts."

"This is my 40th year in public life, and I can't imagine a better way to finish a career than to be able to be a part of what I consider to be maybe the biggest governmental transition in the state's history, not just the city's history," he said. "And so it's an incredible honor to be able to fill this role, even on an interim basis."

Portland is overhauling its voting system and government structure. Here's what you need to know

By Alex Zielinski (OPB)

July 29, 2024 6 a.m.

Portland is months away from a historic change to both its election system and entire form of government. As campaign signs begin to crowd residential streets and the city starts holding ballot counting trial runs, it's time to dig into the details of the significant changes on Portland's horizon. Here's what Portlanders need to know about the coming changes.

FILE: Portland city commissioners consider an ordinance on April 12, 2023. Mayor Ted Wheeler is seated at center. The city's mayor will no longer sit on City Council or vote on council items once changes take effect in January 2025.

Kristian Foden-Vencil / OPB

Let's start with the basics: What exactly is changing?

A lot. The size of Portland City Council, the city's form of government and the way Portlanders vote will all change.

In November, Portlanders will use a method of voting called ranked choice to elect 12 new city councilors, a new mayor, and the city auditor. The 12 councilors — an increase from the current body of five commissioners, including the mayor — will be elected by geographic district. (Commissioners were previously elected citywide.) Portland's four new districts will each have three representatives on council.

This new governance body will start work in January under a new government format. Under this "mayor-council" model, city councilors will focus solely on legislating and will no longer oversee city bureaus. These departments will instead be overseen by a new city administrator, who will report to the mayor.

How did we get here?

For more than 100 years, the city has run under a "commission" form of government, where council members act as bureau administrators as well as legislators — and are elected citywide. Voters have rejected changes to this style of government no less than seven times since 1913. That changed in 2022.

Every 10 years, Portland City Council appoints a 20-person commission to review the city charter — which is a document akin to a constitution that establishes how the local government operates. This commission met in 2020 to determine any tweaks to the charter. Their recommendations — introduce district representation with a larger council, adopt ranked choice voting, and change the form of government to "mayor-council" — were all driven by the shared interest to increase diversity on the City Council and reflect the needs of constituents across the entire city.

The commission's package of recommendations went to the November 2022 ballot, and was approved with 57% of the vote.

Shortly after Election Day, the city established a new charter transition department focused on making sure the city met the voted-upon plan to have these changes in place by January 2025. Transition staff have spent the past 19 months tackling numerous critical topics, which include overseeing renovations to City Hall to fit the newly expanded council, establishing a new city management structure, and supervising volunteer work to draw the four new district boundaries and set salaries for the new elected officials.

How will this transition change the mayor's role in City Hall?

The mayor will no longer sit on City Council or vote on council items (except to break a tie). Instead, the mayor will work closely with the city administrator to carry out policies approved by council — and craft the annual budget.

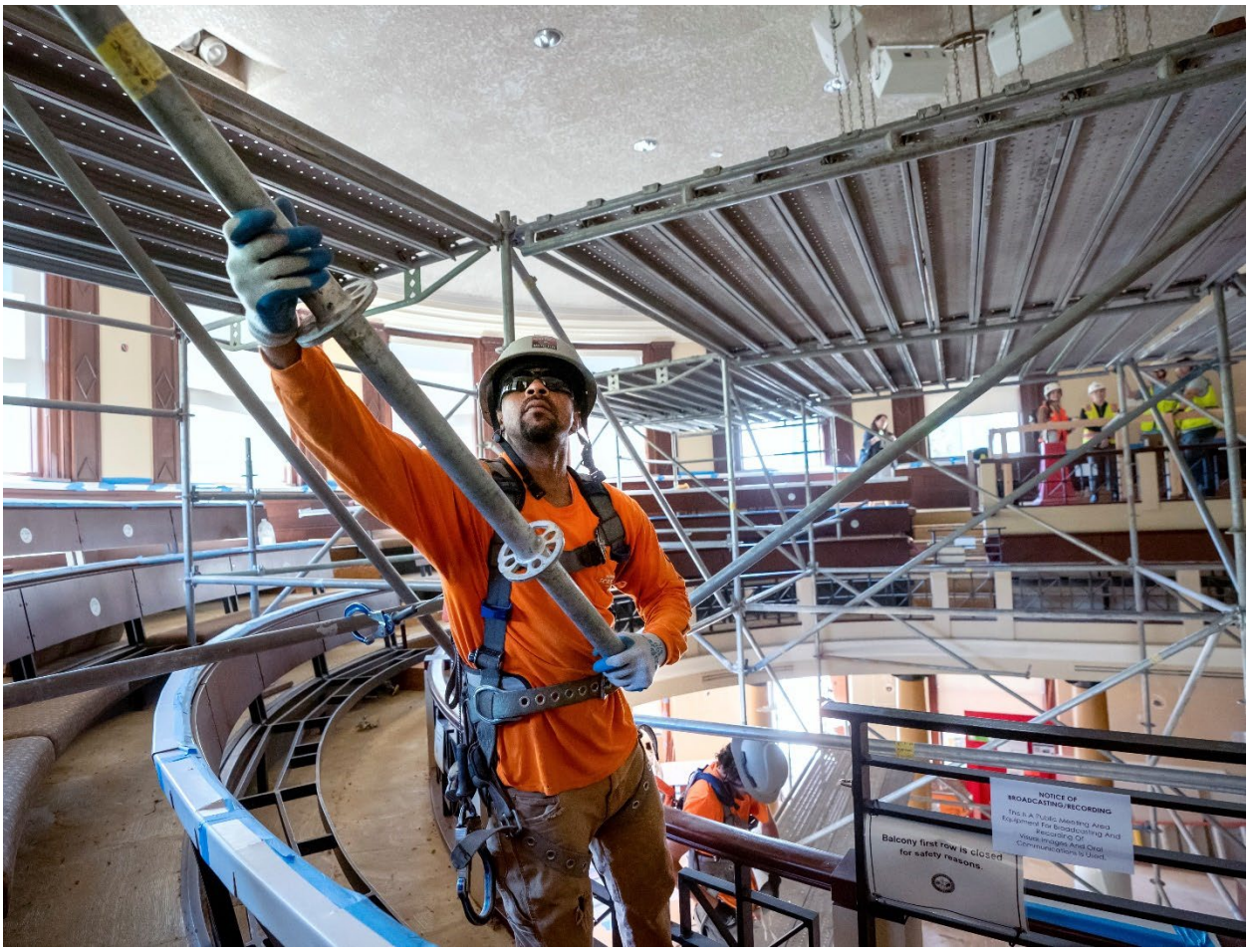
For Tate White, a member of the city's government transition team, a metaphor is the best way to explain the mayor's new job.

"So in the mayor-council form of government, the mayor is the chief executive, the CEO," White said. "Many companies have boards that are making legislative-like decisions — that's the City Council — and then the CEO is expected to execute on those decisions."

White said the mayor will serve more as a figurehead than a legislator.

"They're going to be partnering with other jurisdictions, they'll be standing at press conferences, they're going to be the people meeting with representatives from sister cities when they come and visit, it will be far more ceremonial," she said.

The mayor will also be tasked with appointing a city administrator, city attorney, and police chief — with City Council's approval.



FILE: Syhean Osby of Northwest Scaffold Service Inc. erects scaffolding in the council chambers on May 15, 2024. Construction was underway at Portland City Hall to accommodate the expanded 12-person council, as approved by voters in 2022.

Kristyna Wentz-Graff / OPB

What will the city administrator do?

The city administrator will oversee the day-to-day operations of all city departments.

If the mayor is a more public-facing figurehead, the city administrator will be looking inward. They will be meeting with bureau directors and staff and helping troubleshoot any problems — and will be responsible for hiring, firing or disciplining bureaus leaders.

They won't be working alone. The administrator will have an assistant city administrator and six deputy city administrators working beneath them, each assigned to oversee a cluster of similar city offices. The current City Council has already hired people to fill these positions, so they can hit the ground running before January.

The city administrator will also be a more regular attendee than the mayor at City Council meetings, where they will serve as a resource for bureau-related questions.

OK, so what is the role of City Council under this new form of government?

The 12 City Council members will act as legislators — not unlike state or congressional representatives — tasked with proposing new policies and representing the interests of people living in their district. They will no longer be responsible for overseeing any bureaus, which has been a key role of council members under the outgoing government structure.

Members of City Council will no longer be referred to as commissioners. They will be councilors.

Due to budget limitations, Portland is only offering the new councilors one staffer (currently, commissioners have between six and seven staff each). What that employee focuses on — community engagement, policymaking, office operations — will be up to the councilor to decide.

Will the new City Council be voting on the same kinds of decisions as before?

Not entirely. Council will continue to vote on new legislation, approve the city budget, oversee real estate deals involving the city, levy taxes, pass bonds and refer ballot measures to voters, among other things.

Yet councilors will no longer discuss legal settlements that cost the city less than $50,000 or approve new contracts or most grant applications. These decisions will be made by the city administrator.

Diana Shiplet, another member of the city transition office, said this reflects the voters' request to remove councilors from their bureaucratic roles.

She said City Council members will still have the opportunity to guide these financial decisions through their contribution to the city budget. They can also request that the city administrator's office present regular financial reports and updates on specific programs

Will this change the way policy ideas come to council?

Yes. Currently, the mayor places legislative items on the council agenda. But without a mayor to preside over council meetings, this new body will need to elect a council president. If a council member wants to bring a policy idea to council, the council president must sign off first.

The president will then send that proposal to a council committee. This is also new: Along with attending council meetings, councilors will be expected to sit on committees with focus areas, similar to congressional committees.

The idea is that these committees, made up of up to seven councilors, will serve as the main venue for public testimony and council debate over policy ideas.

“Council committees are intended to be the place where council does the most work — not just work on policy, but engagement with the community,” said Shiplet, with the city’s transition team. “And then each of those committees will make a recommendation on either sending forward legislation or requesting more research to be done. Those then go to the full council afterwards.”

It’s not yet clear how many committees will exist, how frequently they will meet or what their topic areas will be — that decision is up to the incoming council. A volunteer advisory group overseeing the transition has proposed a few ideas, like having committees focused on housing, transportation and public safety.

There are other ways to get legislation before the City Council.

While no longer a member of council, the mayor is permitted to submit policy proposals to council for consideration. If a bureau needs council to consider a policy change, it will also go through the mayor’s office. The city auditor is also allowed to place items on the council agenda.

What else does the council president do?

In many ways, this person will serve as the face of all council decisions and be expected to speak on behalf of the entire council in public.

But this new leadership role introduces room for potential overlap with the mayor, as the mayor is also expected to represent the city and its policies.

“As the council makes their decision as a group, there’s going to be more discussion between the council president and the mayor about who’s going to be the face of that decision,” Shiplet said. “In many cases, it will be the council president speaking for the council, and in some cases when it is connected to the overall vision of the city, it’s probably the mayor who will be speaking, hopefully, in tandem with the council president on those decisions.”

This is a lot of change. Who will be responsible for making sure it's going according to plan?

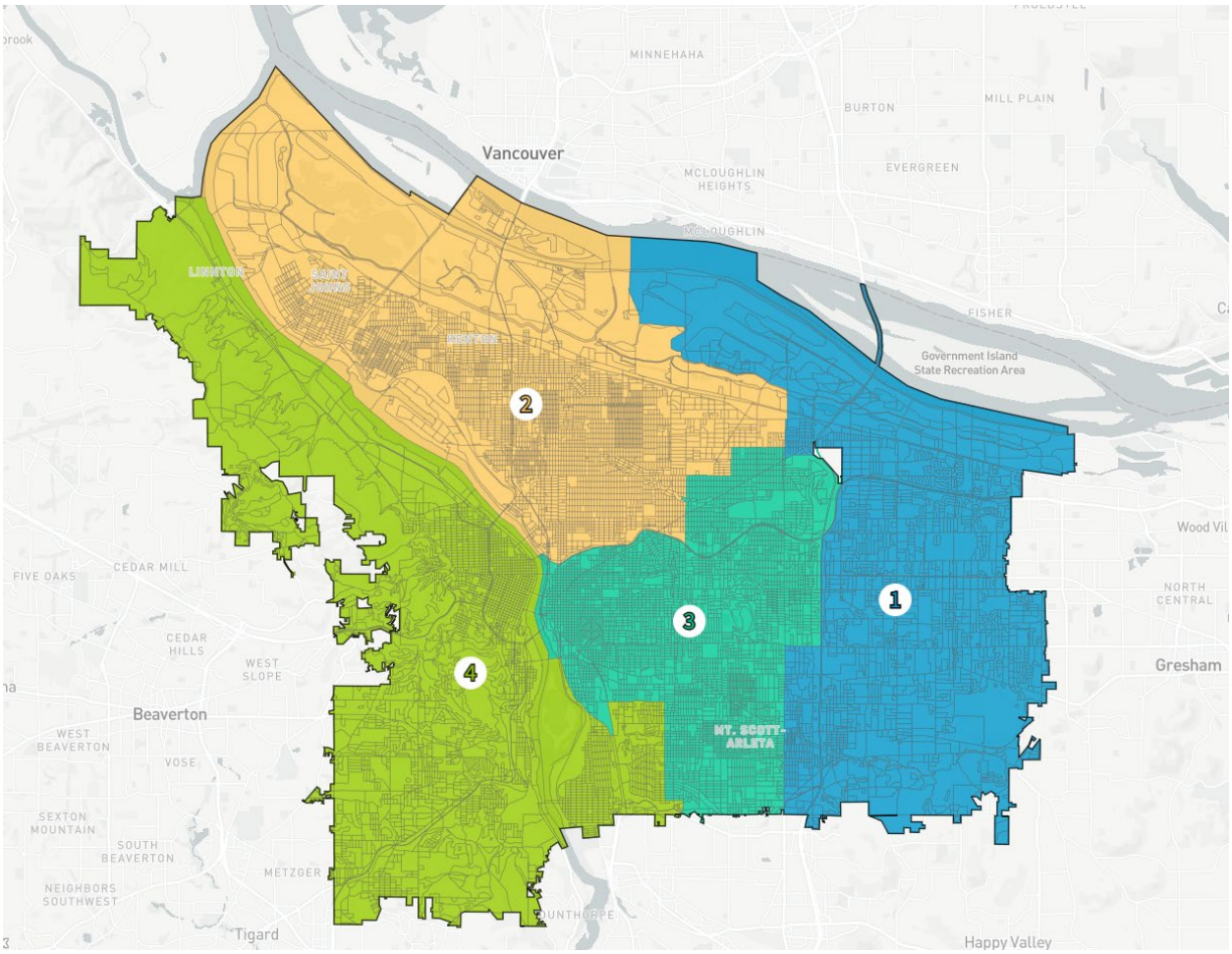
Right now, that's the job of the city's transition team. They are planning to hold onboarding meetings with incoming council members shortly after the November election and into the new year — for as long as it takes for them to get the hang of the new processes.

City Council will also have a new office dedicated to helping the new body run. The council operations team of at least five people will report directly to the council president and make sure the new council and committees are functioning. They'll also be on hand to provide background and research on policies the council may be discussing.

So if I have a problem with something the city is in charge of, who do I contact?

In the outgoing form of government, where city commissioners oversee bureaus, commissioners have constituent services staff who have been expected to field these kinds of questions. With just one staff member, that's not anticipated to be a councilors' responsibility.

Instead, if a Portlander has a problem with a basic city service — maybe there's a pothole that needs fixing, or your garbage wasn't picked up, or a park light is broken — they will be advised to call 311. That city-run information line will connect callers to the right bureau to resolve a problem. The service will also patch callers through to councilors' offices, if they want to comment on a legislative decision.



FILE: An map showing Portland's new council districts.

Courtesy of the City of Portland

We have to vote before any of this falls into place. What's going to be different about the way we vote in November?

Portlanders will be using ranked choice voting. It's arguably the most complicated update to the city's new playbook.

Previously, voters elected people to city office by selecting just a single candidate. If a candidate collects more than 50% of votes in a primary election, they automatically win. If no candidate receives a majority in the primary, the top two candidates move on to the general election. The new voting system abolished primary elections for city offices, which usually occur in May, and condensed this elimination process into one election cycle — the November general election.

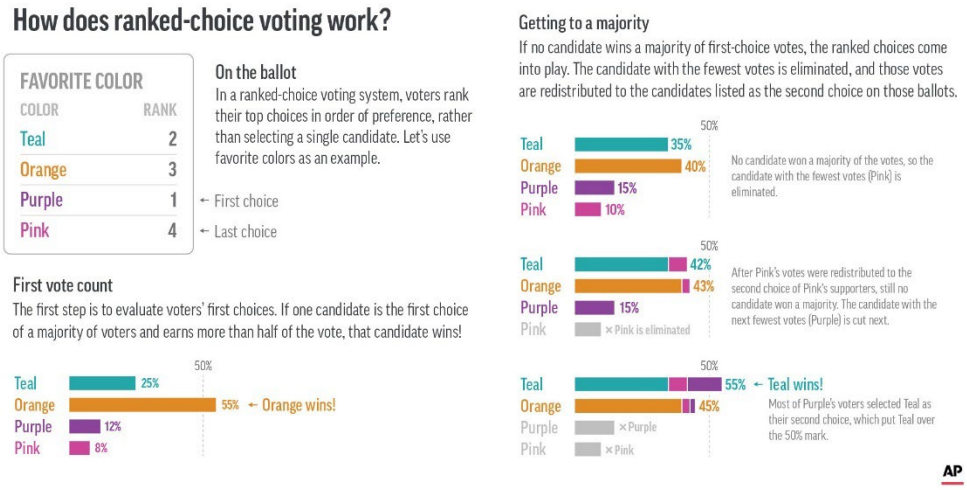
In November, Portlanders will be voting to elect a new mayor, auditor, and their three new district representatives on council. But instead of just casting one vote in each race, voters

will be expected to rank candidates according to their preference. The idea is to increase the chance of voters electing someone they support, even if the winning candidate is not their top pick.

In the mayor and auditor races, voters will rank up to six candidates. In those races, a candidate automatically wins if more than 50% of voters select them as their first choice. If no candidate reaches this threshold, the candidate with the least number of votes is eliminated. Voters who chose the losing candidate as their top pick get their votes transferred to the candidate who was their second choice, and staff recalculate the results. If that doesn't push a candidate over 50%, the cycle continues until someone crosses that threshold.

It's slightly different in the council district races, where voters will be picking three candidates all at once. Like in the citywide races, voters will rank six candidates in order of preference. Any candidate who gets over 25% of the first-choice votes automatically wins a council seat. If only one or two candidates pass that threshold, the candidate with the least amount of first-choice votes is kicked out of the race. Voters who picked this eliminated candidate as their first choice get their vote transferred to their second-choice candidate. Similarly, voters whose first-choice candidate won over 25% get a fraction of their vote redistributed to their second choice. This process continues until three candidates pass the 25% threshold.

Still following? If this process is hard to wrap your head around, you're not alone. Visual learners might appreciate this helpful video made by civic engagement nonprofit Rose City Reform that breaks down the new election process with puppets.



How does ranked-choice voting work? This visual explainer walks through the steps of the ranked-choice voting process.

Kati Perry / AP

Will my ballot look different?

A little. The ranked choice ballot will have bubbles to fill out next to each candidate's name and columns to rank them. It's pretty straightforward: Here are some examples. While each race will likely have more than six candidates, voters will only be allowed to rank six.

Portland voters will also receive two ballots in the mail this year: One for ranked-choice voting, and the other for county, state and national elections, which won't be using ranked-choice.

Will this new process mean it will take longer to learn who wins in November?

Not necessarily.

On Election Night the first round of results will come in at 8 p.m., as they have in the past. Because not all ballots will be in at that point, due to a rule allowing mail-in ballots to be mailed on Election Day, it may not be immediately clear who is in the lead after the initial round.

Multnomah County oversees city elections. In the past, the office has posted updated ballot counts every few hours on election night. Under this new model, the county elections office will wait 24 hours after the first announcement before updating results — those will come in on Thursday, Nov. 6. That delay is to ensure accuracy in the brand-new system.

In the meantime, the elections department is working hard to fine-tune the new system and new ballot-counting technology to ensure it runs smoothly and swiftly in November. They're planning for all scenarios. Leah Benson is the ranked choice voting project manager at Multnomah County. She said the office has been conducting trial runs of the ballot counting system, and they even plan on practicing hand-counting ranked choice ballots later this summer to ensure votes can be counted in the case of a technology meltdown

"It's great to rely on computers, but it's nice to prove that it's something that we can do by hand, too," Benson said.

What still needs to be figured out?

Not much. The city transition team is primarily focused on trying to explain all of this to voters in the coming months.

There is more opportunity for the public to shape this new process. Portlanders can give input online on how the council should operate under the new system or give feedback during an Aug. 1 listening session.

Above all, White wants to ensure that Portlanders expectations are realistic as they head into a brand-new chapter of government.

“It’s such a huge change. We are doing significant work to prepare and are really hoping for the best, but I hope everyone knows that it’s going to be paced out,” White said. “I think if I had a message for everyone, it’s just like, ‘We’ve got this. Just don’t get frustrated on day one when it doesn’t seem absolutely perfect.’”

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Portland’s sweeping overhaul of government, elections nears. No one knows what will unfold

- Updated: Sep. 11, 2024, 10:37 a.m.
- |Published: Aug. 04, 2024, 6:00 a.m.

Portland City Hall is undergoing renovations as officials prepare to accommodate an expanded City Council and new administrative structure that are part of a sweeping set of government changes approved by voters in 2022. Beth Nakamura

By

- **Shane Dixon Kavanaugh | The Oregonian/OregonLive**

Come early January, after months of painstaking work and an historic election of a new mayor and City Council, a first full view of Portland’s radically transformed government and political power structures will emerge inside the council’s chambers at City Hall.

A dozen seats — not five — will dominate the dais, enough for an expanded legislative body. Its members will hail from four separate geographic districts rather than the city at large and be tasked with policy making and constituent services. At the peak of the u-shaped rostrum will sit a council president endowed with powers that observers say could be on par with the mayor.

Meanwhile, the mayor — who for decades held center stage — will be relegated to a reserved seat near the dais, where, with clipped wings, they may cast a vote only in case of a council tie and will hold no veto power.

Next to them will be a new commanding force: a city administrator chosen by the mayor, yet subject to council approval. That unelected official, along with a half-dozen deputies, will oversee the vast bureaucracy that Portland mayors of the past parceled out among their commissioner colleagues.

How this new government functions will depend on factors not discussed when the question of sweeping reform was placed before voters two years ago.

Those include whether the new mayor and city administrator can play nice with City Council leaders and whether council members will be hobbled by a legislative branch slated to be equipped with far fewer staff and resources than in peer cities with similar structures.

Who among the more than 80 candidates now vying for council seats across the city's new multi-member districts wins in November, and whether they represent the range of views and experiences that the architects of the relatively novel electoral system envisioned, also remains to be seen.

Political observers and scholars around the nation are watching closely to see what unfolds.

"I just don't know what to expect," said Archon Fung, a professor at Harvard University's John F. Kennedy School of Government and director of the Ash Center for Democratic Governance and Innovation. "Portland is engaging in a bold, exciting experiment."

Despite the dramatic makeover inside Portland City Hall, the problems its leaders must tackle are dreadfully familiar, from curbing the number of homicides, drug overdoses and tents on the streets to spurring transportation improvements and building more affordable housing.

Champions of the changes believe they will bring about improved outcomes and greater accountability.

"We are setting ourselves up for the best chance of success," said Candace Avalos, an environmental and racial justice advocate who served among the 20-member charter commission that kickstarted the city's most consequential ballot measure in recent memory.

In 2022, Portland voters en masse supported the effort to upend the city's government and electoral system amid cascading municipal crises and profound misgivings about elected leaders' ability to tame them.

Proponents of the initiative sought to break Portland's political gridlock and turn the day-to-day operations of the city over to a professional bureaucracy, as already happens in the vast majority of the nation's big cities and counties.

They also hoped to more fairly distribute power and offer communities that have traditionally lacked a seat at City Hall a greater voice by adopting a system as unusual as the one they wanted to replace.

Neither aim will be easy to achieve.

"One thing that Portlanders should realize is that fundamentally remaking our government is not something where you flip the switch on day one," said Commissioner Mingus Mapps. "The next mayor and council have a lot of work to do and it's going to be hard."

DISCONTENT WITH STATUS QUO

For more than a century, Portland's mayor and four city commissioners each controlled a subset of two dozen bureaus and departments, creating a municipal outlier among modern U.S. cities.

Under the commission form of government, created in 1913, elected leaders sought office citywide and could live anywhere in Portland. That tended to favor well-heeled or politically connected candidates from predominately affluent neighborhoods.

White men, for example, comprised the entire City Council as recently as 2008. Historically, only two members have lived east of Interstate 205, home to about a quarter of Portland's population.

Yet even as the city's elected body became increasingly diverse in the last decade, other problems with Portland's odd form of government — such as its tendency to be unresponsive to the needs of some neighborhoods or get bogged down by political infighting — persisted and became more pronounced.

A growing chorus of politicians, business leaders and civic activists all began to call for scrapping the system — a prospect rejected by voters on eight prior occasions — arguing that the status quo was inherently inequitable and had become an obstacle for City Hall officials seeking to address complex challenges.

Calls for change only intensified as the city tilted toward the brink amid the pandemic, 2020's racial justice uprising and a dramatic increase in gun violence, homelessness and livability concerns.

Portland City Hall renovations

“The opportunity for (reforms) came from a permissive political environment, characterized by the widespread perception that Portland was ‘broken,’” Fung and two of his colleagues at the Kennedy School wrote in a recent study of the city’s government and electoral overhaul.

The authors based their findings on interviews with two dozen people across Portland’s political spectrum.

However, the proposal ultimately crafted by the citizen-led charter commission caused the near-universal consensus for change to crumble and ignited a costly and bitterly-fought political battle.

The decision to end Portland’s unique approach of having individual City Council members act as bureaucratic heads and turn most of that responsibility over to a professional city administrator overseen by the mayor was utterly uncontroversial.

Nor did many object to provisions that eliminated primaries for city races and had the mayor and city auditor elected citywide using a common form of ranked-choice voting.

Some government-watchers expressed reservations about the prospect of Portland's mayor having diminished powers with no veto pen.

But the real flashpoint came over the measure's most radical component: having voters elect three City Council members from each of four large geographic districts by using a form of ranked-choice voting that requires only 25% to win and is not used to choose council members in any other U.S. city.

Skeptics also decried the decision to present the sweeping reform package as a single measure, despite concerns over various components or that a largely untested system could potentially sow even more dysfunction.

Proponents forcefully pushed back. They said the decision to forgo a more traditional method of electing one council representative per district was motivated in large part because historically underserved Portlanders — such as racial and ethnic minorities and renters — don't comprise a majority in any geographic area of the city. They also defended bundling several substantial charter changes into one all-or-nothing proposal, arguing that each is dependent on the others to succeed.

"Ultimately, Portlanders wanted to vote for change, even if it was an imperfect proposition," said Vadim Mozyrsky, who served on the charter commission but later became one of the proposal's most vocal opponents. "We'd been heading in the wrong direction for too damn long."

PUTTING THEORY INTO ACTION

Current City Hall officials, spurred by Mayor Ted Wheeler, began at once to design details of the bureaucratic makeover under an ambitious two-year transition plan.

Staffers quickly hammered out the rules and formulae for the city's new voting systems and homed in on reorganizing a 7,000-person city workforce. A trio of citizen-appointed commissions created council district boundaries, established new salaries for elected officials and served as an advisory group for the transition.

Last fall, the City Council approved a plan to consolidate all Portland bureaus and agencies, along with their existing directors, under six broad service areas — budget and finance, community and economic development, city operations, public safety, public works and vibrant communities. Those changes went into effect earlier this year.

Each of the consolidated service areas is currently overseen by an interim deputy city administrator, a newly created and highly compensated position, initially selected by the individual council member who'd led bureaus in those realms. The city administrator will pick their own deputies in the future.

Wheeler this spring tapped Michael Jordan — who previously served as Portland's chief administrative officer and lead the city's government transition plan — as interim city administrator.

Last month, the mayor clawed back all city bureaus from his fellow commissioners and has since convened weekly meetings with the new administrative team, effectively test-driving a revamped executive branch that he will hand off to a successor in January.

Portland Mayor Ted Wheeler (right) and Interim City Administrator Michael Jordan (left) speak to reporters during a June 18, 2024 press conference about the city's sweeping government transition. (Ethan Cirmo, courtesy City of Portland.)Ethan Cirmo, courtesy City of Portland.

"We're dynamiting the bureaucracy and we're blowing up the walls and the vertical silos that have been cemented into place for decades," Wheeler said in an interview with The Oregonian/OregonLive. "We're making things easier, faster, more efficient, more responsive and, I think, ultimately more accountable."

Wheeler, however, said his bullish outlook on how well Portland's new government will function is tempered somewhat by the fact that future mayors won't have the ability to veto City Council decisions, a power granted to about 75% of mayors leading the nation's 40 largest cities, including west coast neighbors Seattle and San Francisco.

"That will likely lead to a bunch of finger-pointing between the mayor and the council when things don't go well," he said. "I see this as a potential pitfall and a misguided decision."

The next mayor of Portland and their chosen city administrator will also have to contend with a new powerful figure at City Hall: a City Council president selected by a majority of their peers.

That person will set the priorities, vision and agenda for the 12-member legislative body, decide who serves on what future committees and what issues or items go before the council. As such, a lot will ride on how well Portland's mayor and council president can get along and whether the two are able to minimize the inevitable frictions and tensions that will arise.

"Where this new government will pass or fail is on the executive and the legislative branches working closely together, not shutting each other out, working in good faith," Jordan, the interim city administrator, said.

Some observers, however, believe that this future relationship could already be hobbled, because of what they say is Wheeler and his transition team's move to shortchange the new City Council.

The mayor's budget for this fiscal year, which runs through the end of next June, authorized funding for each council member to have just one staff member and to outfit the entire City Council operation with an additional nine employees.

That decision came even after Portland's government transition advisory team warned that such staffing figures would be significantly smaller than those of 15 peer cities reviewed by the group and would hamstring council members' ability to effectively legislate or provide responsive constituent services, documents show.

"They are deliberately kneecapping the incoming City Council," Bob Weinstein, a council candidate in the city's new westside district, told The Oregonian/OregonLive. He and 10 other candidates across Portland signed a letter last month urging Wheeler and the current City Council to reverse course.

In a recent interview, the mayor rebuffed such calls and characterizations and said a future council could change its staffing model if it was unhappy.

"If they feel that we did not create enough bureaucracy for the elected City Council, with a matter of a single vote, they can fix that," Wheeler said.

SPRAWLING FIELD OF CONTENDERS

Another point of contention with Portland's transition plan surfaced when the mayor and his council colleagues chose to give only $1.4 million of the $7 million requested by leaders of the city program that matches small dollar contributions given to candidates 9-to-1.

The program, which seeks to reduce the influence of big money donors and bring a more diverse array of financial contributors into the political process, slashed its public matching funds cap by 60% for November's historic election when they learned how many candidates were likely to run and to qualify for public funding.

Because of the cuts, council candidates jockeying to get their names, faces and policy stances before voters in a crowded field can now qualify for up to only $120,000 instead of $300,000 as initially planned.

That in turn could diminish the prospects of political newcomers or those with limited support from traditional power players while bolstering the very interest groups that the new system seeks to restrain, observers say.

"When there's not enough public money**,** you're disadvantaging people from lower-income backgrounds and those with less wealthy networks," said Paige Richardson, a top Oregon political strategist. "If they wanted to level the playing field, this hasn't done it."

Despite those concerns, the prospect of becoming one of a dozen new Portland City Council members has drawn widespread interest across all four districts. At least 84 people have said they are running, though that number is likely to shrink as the city's formal filing deadline approaches later this month.

Under Portland's new multi-member system, candidates need to get a high ballot ranking from 25% of a district's voters votes to win. Each of the winners, including those who place third in their district**,** will earn $133,000 a year.

Among the sprawling field of contenders are a forensic accountant and Portland bike cop; multiple urban planners, small business owners and environmental advocates; retirees and neighborhood activists; and numerous people who've worked in government or previously held elected office in Portland and elsewhere.

Their ages range from 22 to 87. And while their passions and politics span a wide spectrum, they're proving to be a formidable bunch worthy of praise, said Jon Isaacs, executive vice president for public affairs with the Portland Metro Chamber, the region's most influential business lobby.

"It's no secret that we have – and continue to have – deep concerns about the experimental election system the charter commission sent to the ballot in 2022," said Isaacs, whose group spent more than $100,000 opposing the measure. "Having said that, we have been pleasantly surprised with the overall quality and seriousness of Portlanders who have put themselves out there to run for City Council."

“By and large we have found candidates to be focused on our most urgent priorities, a willingness to listen and learn, and an optimistic belief that Portland’s best days are ahead of us,” Isaacs continued. “Portlanders should be excited that this election we genuinely will be a part of ushering in a new generation of pragmatic problem solvers to City Council.”

Avalos, the former charter commission member, who identifies as Black and Latina, is now among the 16 hoping to represent East Portland, the city’s most neglected quadrant.

She said that she too is encouraged by the people who are running. But she also said that the full promise or potential of Portland’s electoral system has yet to materialize and may not for a while.

Avalos noted that, to date, only about a third of declared candidates identify as women and about a fifth are from communities of color or Indigenous. Homeowners continue to vastly outnumber those who rent a house or apartment.

“It’s going to take time to build a bench, a pipeline for everyday Portlanders to step up and lead,” she said. “We have to build a culture around our new form of government, and I see that taking time.”

Colin Cole, a policy director with More Equitable Democracy, a national group that tracks and promotes electoral reforms across the U.S., said it often takes multiple election cycles under a new system for voters, candidates, political consultants and organizations to fully embrace the changes at hand.

Portland will likely be no exception, Cole said.

“The city has spent 100 years in an ecosystem where campaigns look, run and feel a certain way,” he said. “It’s going to be a lot like transferring schools or starting a new job.”

-- Shane Dixon Kavanaugh covers Portland city government and politics, with a focus on accountability and watchdog reporting.

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KGW **Straight Talk**

Portland to use ranked choice voting to decide mayor, city council election. Here's how it works

This year is an historic election in Portland, as it is the first time voters will pick elected leaders under the new city government — and voting system.

Author: Laural Porter

Published: 11:40 AM PDT September 6, 2024

Updated: 11:16 AM PDT September 9, 2024

PORTLAND, Ore. — The general election on Nov. 5 is less than two months away, where voters in Portland will not just decide who the next president will be, but also locally who will be the next mayor and city council members.

This year for local elections, Portlanders for the first time will have the option to rank their choices in order of preference through ranked-choice voting.

In this episode of "Straight Talk," we walk through the process of how ranked-choice voting works and what Portlanders can expect out of their ballots.

The deadline to register to vote in Portland is Oct. 15, and ballots will be sent out on Oct. 16.

What Portlanders will vote on?

This year is an historic election in Portland, as it is the first time voters will pick elected leaders under the new city government. Instead of voting for four city council commissioners, Portlanders will select a 12-member city council.

The main difference is that the Portland City Council will look more focused on passing policy — like state or federal legislatures — instead of managing bureaus and day-to-day operations like they do now.

Also in November, Portlanders will vote on a new mayor whose role in the new government will be slightly different as well, and a new city auditor will get picked.

To see more on how the Portland city government is changing, click here.

What's ranked-choice voting?

Traditionally, voters choose one candidate, and whoever gets the highest percentage of the vote wins the election, even if they don't win a majority.

But with ranked-choice voting, instead of just voting for one candidate, voters rank them in order of preference.

If nobody gets more than 50% of the first-place votes, the person with the least votes is eliminated. Voters who picked that last-ranked candidate as their first choice will have their votes go toward their second choice — in what's an instant runoff.

The process keeps going until someone gets a majority and is declared the winner.

"One of the advantages that is inherent in this system is that you have more choice that's just obvious from your ballot," said James Eccles, an elections analyst with Portland Auditors Office. "Instead of having a single column to select a single candidate for your choice, you're going to have up to six to rank. So more of your options and your voice is seen on that ballot."

How's a winner decided in ranked-choice voting?

For the Portland mayoral race, single-winner ranked choice voting will be used, where the candidate will win when they have 50% of the votes plus one.

In the other Portland election for the 12-member city council, multi-winner ranked choice voting will be used. In this case, three candidates are elected at the same time, each with 25% of the votes plus one.

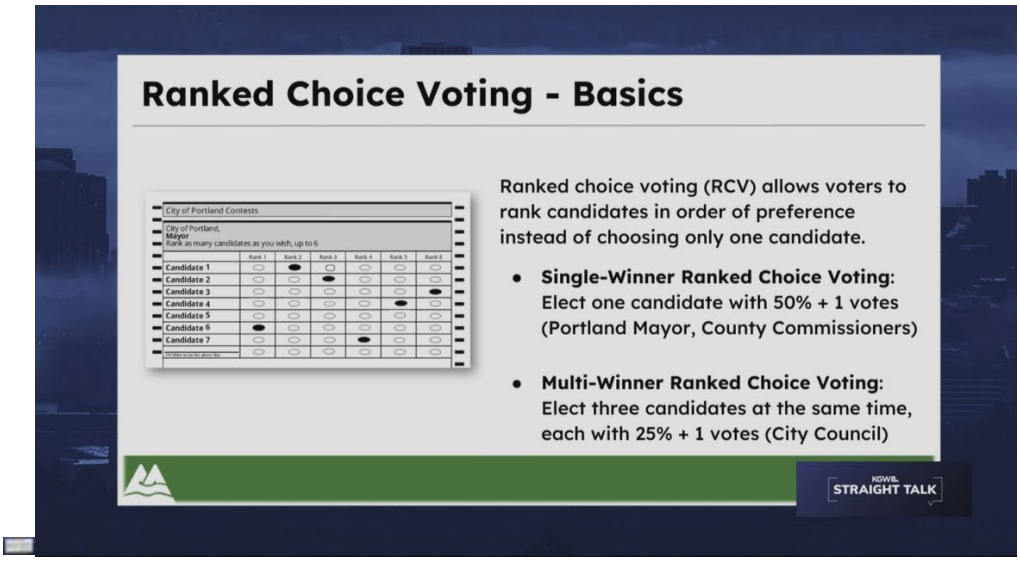
If there's a candidate that as a voter you really don't like, you don't need to rank them, said Tim Scott, director of Multnomah County Elections.

"Don't mark it. Don't vote for anyone that you don't want to serve in office," Scott said.

Essentially, voters only need to focus on ranking their favorite candidates.

A couple things to be cautious of with this year’s ballot. Portland voters will need to pay extra attention to which row and column they are filling in. If two ovals are filled in within the same row and column, that ranking may be skipped in the tallying process. However, any correctly filled-in rankings on that ballot would still be counted.

Details on how ballots are counted can be found at www.portland.gov/vote.



Credit: Multnomah County

Example ballot explaining how ranked choice voting will work in Portland and Multnomah County elections.

KGW's Pat Dooris and Jamie Parfitt contributed reporting to this article.
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Yes, some Portland councilors will serve shortened terms after this year's election

Councilors elected in the future will all serve four-year terms, but half of this year's winners will serve two-year terms so that future elections can be staggered.

Credit: KGW

Author: Anthony Macuk (KGW)

Published: 3:08 PM PDT September 19, 2024

Updated: 3:08 PM PDT September 19, 2024

PORTLAND, Ore. — The 2024 general election is less than two months away, and it's a big one for Portland. Not only will the city be using its new ranked-choice voting system for the first time, but every single elected office in the city government will be on the ballot.

It's an unprecedented situation for the city that normally only votes for half of its elected officials at a time. Given that they all serve four-year terms, it's natural to wonder what this year's free-for-all will mean for the winners when the next election arrives in 2026.

Here's what we can VERIFY:

THE QUESTION and THE ANSWER

Will some of the winners in this year's Portland City Council election serve shorter terms than others?

Yes, half of the 12 winners in this year's election will serve shortened two-year terms on the council to set up future staggered elections.

WHAT WE FOUND

Portland will complete its transition to an all-new form of government on Jan. 1, replacing the current five-member city council with a new governing body composed of 12 councilors, three from each of the city's four new geographic districts. Portland voters ordered the change when they passed a charter reform measure in 2022.

The new charter is a top-to-bottom overhaul that changes the way the city is managed and governed, as well its voting system, but one feature of the old system is sticking around: Officials will all serve four-year terms, with the start dates staggered so that elections happen every two years.

Under the current system, that means the mayor and two of the four city commissioners are elected in presidential election years, and the city auditor and the other two commissioners are elected in midterm years.

Under the new system, the mayor and all city council seats for districts 1 and 2 will appear on the ballot during presidential election years — starting with this year — while the auditor and council seats for districts 3 and 4 will be be on the ballot in midterm years, starting with the next midterm elections in 2026.

But this year is a special case because it's the first election under the new system, and none of the elected officials under the current system will carry over next year — even the ones who were only elected two years ago will be out of office on Jan. 1.

That means all 12 council seats, plus the mayor and auditor seats, have to be filled in one shot with the 2024 election — otherwise, the auditor's office and half the council seats would be empty until after the first regularly scheduled election for those seats in November 2026.

But it also means that the winners of this year's races for auditor and districts 3 and 4 will only get to serve two-year terms, because at the end of 2026, they'll have to make way for the start of the regular four-year term cycle for those seats — though, of course, the people who win those seats in 2024 will be free to run again in 2026 to try to retain them.

Got a question or a story about Portland or Oregon that you'd like us to VERIFY? Drop us a line at verify@kgw.com.

KGW **The Story**

Portland mayor will win some, lose some powers when taking office in 2025

In November, Portland will elect a new mayor using a new form of voting. The city's structure is changing, so the mayor will have new powers but also lose old ones.

Author: Pat Dooris, Amy-Xiaoshi DePaola

Published: 7:01 PM PDT October 9, 2024

Updated: 7:01 PM PDT October 9, 2024

PORTLAND, Ore. — Under Portland's new form of government, the mayor will be elected by a winner-take-all style of ranked-choice voting. The person who gets 50%-plus-1 will win and take office on Jan. 1.

Unlike the current system, the mayor is not part of the city council. They will only cast a vote to break ties when the city council is deadlocked on something.

But the mayor can introduce new laws, and they will hire the city administrator, with council approval, who will run the city government with the mayor's guidance. So, the mayor will have a fair amount of power.

Shoshana Oppenheim, the manager in charge of Portland's move to the new government, has studied the duties of the mayor.

"The first mayor elected by ranked-choice voting is going to come into the city with an agenda. So, advancing that agenda is going to be top of mind for the mayor," she said. "So, whether or not that's an agenda that includes revitalizing the downtown, economic future of the city, climate change, any of those initiatives — moving those initiatives both through the administration and advancing policy at the city council.

"Remember the mayor, while not a member of city council, can introduce legislation through the city council process, so they have initiatives. They're going to be working with their colleagues to not only advance their own policies but also to be sure they have support for their first budget."

Thus, the council will have a lot on their plate.

The mayor will also hire the police chief and the city attorney, although the council has to approve both choices. The mayor can fire them, as well.

Other duties include drawing up a yearly budget for the city, along with a statement about the condition of the city and the goals of the administration, as well as laws that could help reach those goals.

The mayor must also appear before the city council to deliver a yearly talk on the state of the city.

Portland's current mayor, Ted Wheeler, is not running for reelection. He said that the next mayor will be weaker because they will not have a veto over laws the council passes. However, Oppenheim disagrees.

"I think what the charter commission did was really devise a system that really asks the elected officials and our city administrator to work together to address the policy priorities of Portlanders," she said. "So, while they may not have a veto, that doesn't mean that they can't influence policy during the policymaking process.

"So, as things are moving through committee, as things are being advanced and developed by either their council colleagues or by their organization, they have the opportunity to influence that policy and make sure its policy that is implementable and achievable and addressing the concerns of Portlanders."

Tim Scott on Portland's ranked-choice voting system

by: Ken Boddie

Posted: Jul 28, 2024 / 09:45 AM PDT

Updated: Oct 20, 2024 / 11:59 AM PDT

PORTLAND, Ore. (KOIN) — A new way of voting is coming to Portland, just in time for the November election. It's called ranked-choice voting, which is new to us, but already used in Alaska, Maine and in about 50 local jurisdictions across the country.

Portland will be the first to use ranked-choice voting this November to elect a new mayor, auditor and the new 12-member city council, which will have 3 elected councilors in each of four newly created districts. Multnomah County as a whole goes to the system in 2026.

Multnomah County Elections Director Tim Scott joined Eye on Northwest Politics to show an example of a correctly filled out ranked choice ballot, explain some mistakes to avoid when filling out the ballot and how to correct a mistake before sending your ballot off in the mail.

With so many candidates for Portland City Council where this is really going to come into play this November and multiple rounds, Scott also addresses whether there may be any delays in reporting the results.

To get used to the format of ranked-choice voting, you can cast your votes in a mock ballot on Multnomah County's site **here**.

Watch the full video in the player above.

###

A once-in-a-generation change': Oregon's biggest city prepares for monumental overhaul of government

Portland will implement ranked-choice voting and move from a governing commission to oversight by administrator

Dani Anguiano

Mon 28 Oct 2024 10.00 EDT

When voters in Portland, Oregon, fill out their ballots in next month's election they will be tasked not only with selecting new leaders, but also the implementation of a monumental overhaul of the city's government.

Two years ago, residents moved to fundamentally alter their local government structure and adopted what experts have described as some of the most "expansive voting reforms" undertaken by a major US city in recent decades. Come November, the city will use ranked-choice voting to elect a mayor and a larger, more representative city council as Portland moves from a commission form of government to one overseen by a city administrator.

The shake-up comes after challenging years for Portland in which the city of 630,000 grappled with a declining downtown, rising homelessness, a fentanyl crisis, growing public drug use and the continued economic impacts of the pandemic years.

While some news coverage has portrayed the shift as Portlanders rejecting the city's historically progressive values, those involved with the project counter that residents are embracing democratic reforms that will lead to a more equitable government better equipped to solve the city's problems.

"It was really clear that this system was, as operated, very inequitable," said Jenny Lee, managing director of Building Power for Communities of Color, a non-profit that was a key proponent of the effort.

"And the challenges in governing are going to be felt the most by those who already have been marginalized in our political system."

Now the city waits to see what the "once-in-a-generation" change will mean for its future.

Since 1913, Portland has used a commission form of government. The commission consisted of five people elected citywide and who were responsible for passing policies and also acting as administrators in charge of city departments.

The system was briefly popular in other major US cities, but then largely abandoned, said Richard Clucas, a political science professor at Portland State University.

“Most cities who adopted that form of government realized there were problems with it,” he said. “Someone may be good as a legislator but it doesn’t make them good as an administrator.”

An unhoused man sits in his tent in Portland, Oregon, on 5 June 2021. Growing voter frustration over surging homelessness helped usher in the overhaul of city government. Photograph: Paula Bronstein/AP

And Portland’s system had long failed to adequately represent different demographics in the city, Lee said. The city’s elected officials historically have been white men from more affluent areas where residents are more likely to have a higher income and own their homes, according to the Sightline Institute. In 2017, only two people of color had ever been elected to the city council.

Under the charter system, simple decisions – such as where to put a bike lane – were politicized, said Shoshanah Oppenheim, the charter transition project manager.

“It was based on the political tide,” said Oppenheim, who is also a senior adviser in the city administrator’s office.

For more than a century, Portlanders rejected attempts to reform the commission system, but that changed when the 10-year review of the city charter coincided with upheaval and challenges of the pandemic years.

The pandemic exacerbated the existing limitations of the city's form of government, according to a report from Harvard's Ash Center for Democratic Governance and Innovation chronicling Portland's reforms.

Meanwhile, Portland was the site of widespread racial justice protests and an ensuing federal crackdown, the city's economic recovery from the pandemic was slow, and residents grew increasingly disillusioned with their leaders' ability to make meaningful progress tackling homelessness and drug abuse.

Those challenges created an opportunity to have meaningful conversations about elections and government, Lee said.

Clucas echoed that sentiment: "I think the public was looking and happy to take on some sort of change."

Community leaders had spent years educating themselves about electoral reform, and saw an opportunity to create change in the city, the report stated.

With support from community organizations and local activists, the commission brought a measure before voters that would make key changes to the city's system, allowing voters to rank local candidates in order of preference, expand the city council from five to 12 representatives elected from four newly created districts, and move to a system of government overseen by a professional city administrator.

Despite criticism about the complexity of the measure and opposition from political leaders and the business community, 58% of voters approved the package of reforms proposed by the commission.

Although the timing coincided with major changes and social issues, Lee said the reforms were not reactionary and instead an example of Portland being willing to try new things, which ties into Oregon's long history of democratic reforms aimed at making government more participatory.

"It was a message about change, but it was definitely a hopeful one," she said. "It was always about these changes will make our government more effective and equitable."

The city has spent the last two years preparing for a project unlike anything Portland has seen before,Oppenheim said. "We had a really short timeline … It's been an all-hands-on-deck approach," she said. "There is no playbook. We are making it up as we go along."

Next month, voters will decided among more than 100 candidates for 12 council seats and 19 candidates for mayor. A recent poll from the Oregonian suggested a once-longshot

candidate, whose campaign has focused on ending homelessness, is well positioned to win.

In a poll of roughly 300 voters from early October, before election packets were sent out, two-thirds responded that they understood how voting works very well or somewhat well. People tend to understand the system right away given that they rank things every day, Oppenheim said.

The city has also developed a voter education program to inform residents about the changes and trained operators on its information line how to explain ranked-choice voting.

The hope is that voters will feel the increased power of their vote, Lee said. “Every vote has a lot of power. Your constituents’ voices really matter. Their second- and third-choice rankings actually really matter.”

After the election, the other major test comes next year when Portland’s new government takes the reins. “We want to be ready on day one so all the city business can continue,” Oppenheim said.

“Portlanders have huge expectations for change and we have a once-in-a-generation opportunity to do things better,” Oppenheim said. “They want a more representative government. We have it in our power to deliver that.”

Portland elects progressive mayor and most diverse city council

As US electorate moves to right, Oregon city bucks trend and also elects most diverse city council in history

Dani Anguiano

Tue 12 Nov 2024 15.00 EST

In 2022 it appeared the political winds in Portland, Oregon, one of the US's most progressive cities, were beginning to shift. Residents who had grown frustrated over the city's approach to homelessness rejected the incumbent, Jo Ann Hardesty – the first Black woman to serve on the city council – in favor of the "law-and-order" Democrat Rene Gonzalez, who pledged to back an expanded police force and "clean up" Portland.

But this month, as swaths of the US electorate moved to the right, the Pacific north-west city took a markedly different approach. Residents elected the most diverse city council in Portland history, opting for more progressives, and rejected Gonzalez as mayoral candidate. Instead, they chose Keith Wilson, a businessperson who has never before held office and has promised to end unsheltered homelessness in a year.

Wilson had large leads over his competitors in the election, the first in which the city used ranked-choice voting and in the latest results was leading the second place candidate 60% to 40%.

The most conservative candidates for mayor and the county board, who took hardline stances, lost, Richard Clucas, a political science professor at Portland State University, pointed out.

"Both were defeated significantly because Portland remains a very progressive city despite what people may have heard elsewhere," Clucas said.

The results came as the city was in the midst of what officials have described as a "once-in-a-generation" change to its government system and major voting reforms. This month, for the first time ever, Portland used ranked-choice voting to elect a mayor and a larger, more representative city council. The new officials will have different roles as Portland moves from a commission form of government to one overseen by a city administrator.

Voters approved the overhaul two years ago – the same year Gonzalez won – as the city of 630,000 people grappled with a declining downtown, rising homelessness, a fentanyl crisis, growing public drug use and a sluggish recovery from the pandemic. Voters

appeared to take out their dissatisfaction with crime, homelessness and drug use on Hardesty, the most progressive member of city council, said Ben Gaskins, a political science professor Lewis & Clark College in Portland.

Some have speculated the city was beginning to recoil from its progressive values, particularly after voters in the county ousted the progressive district attorney for a challenger endorsed by police groups. That came shortly after Oregon moved to reintroduce criminal penalties for the possession of hard drugs, in effect scrapping the state's groundbreaking drug decriminalization law.

Claims the city is turning away from progressivism are significantly overstated, Gaskins said – instead, the shifts indicate an electorate that is more focused on tactical concerns rather than ideological ones.

Gonzalez was widely considered a frontrunner in this year's mayoral race. Calling it a "make-or-break election", the commissioner said that as mayor he would add hundreds of officers to city streets and stop "enabling the humanitarian crisis on our streets by ending the distribution of tents and drug kits".

Wilson, who serves as the chief executive of a trucking company and founded a non-profit to expand shelter capacity and ultimately end homelessness, made the issue the center of his campaign, pledging to reform the city's approach to alleviating the crisis. He insisted the issue could be addressed with "care and compassion", the Oregonian reported, and said he would increase the number of night-time walk-in emergency shelters available in churches and community centers.

That approach appealed to city voters, Clucas said, over harsher remedies. "They don't simply want a crackdown, arrests and other things; they want to find some way to compassionately address it."

At a debate in October, Wilson said he would give city leaders an F for their efforts to address homelessness, according to the Oregonian. "Letting people suffer and die on our streets is unacceptable … I believe that every person in Portland deserves a bed every night," he said.

The progressive Carmen Rubio, a city council member, was also a frontrunner in the race. But she lost endorsements after reporting from the Oregonian revealed that she had received about 150 parking and traffic violations since 2004, many of which she failed to pay for months and years, and that she had her license suspended multiple times.

Gonzalez's campaign was hurt by reporting from the Willamette Week that showed the "public safety champion" had also received seven speeding tickets between 1998 and 2013, and had his license suspended twice.

Wilson was once considered a long-shot candidate, but he was probably bolstered by the city's new ranked-choice voting system, experts said.

His position as a businessperson coming from outside the political system allowed him to be a "compromise candidate", Gaskins said. Wilson fit the gap of someone who is progressive but still represents a change to the status quo, he said.

"I think the fact Keith Wilson was able to win shows Portland wants someone who is clearly on the left but who is focused on policy solutions and getting things done versus just being the most ideologically pure candidate in the race," he said.

"He is a candidate of this particular moment."

In an acceptance speech last week, Wilson pledged to build trust and take advantage of a "transformative opportunity".

"It's time to end unsheltered homelessness and open drug use, and it's time to restore public safety in Portland," he said. "Voters aren't interested in pointing fingers. They just want us to get things done."

Along with Wilson, residents also elected 12 city councillors, nearly half of whom are people of color, Oregon Public Broadcasting reported – a remarkable shift given that just seven years ago, only two people of color had ever been elected to city government. At least four of the new councillors identify as LGBTQ+, the outlet reported, and five received endorsements from the Democratic Socialists of America chapter in Portland.

After a 2-year transition to new voter-approved form of government, Portland's new city councilors elect leaders

Published 1:03 PM PDT, January 3, 2025

PORTLAND, Ore., Jan. 3, 2025 /PRNewswire/ -- Portland's new elected officials entered City Hall's council chambers Thursday for their first official gathering as Portland's legislative body. Launching the city's new form of government, councilors elected Elana Pirtle-Guiney as council president and Tiffany Koyama Lane as council vice president.

"This is a big day, not just for Portland City Council and our new Council President Elana Pirtle-Guiney and Vice President Tiffany Koyama-Lane but for all of Portland," said Portland Mayor Keith Wilson. "Together, we'll face no shortage of decisions in the coming days, and I'm grateful for the people and potential this room represents. I've never been more optimistic about Portland's council leadership, and our ability to repair, restore, and revitalize the city we all love."

Pirtle-Guiney won the council presidency in the ninth round of voting. She emerged as a compromise candidate after multiple tie votes between Councilors Candace Avalos and Olivia Clark – offering Portlanders their first window into the city's new legislative branch of government.

An outlier among cities of similar size, Portland's previous form of government allowed elected officials to operate in the legislative and administrative orbits at the same time. Four commissioners, as they used to be called, were elected to represent the entire city. They developed and voted on policies as well as used their authority to make decisions relating to the daily administrative operations of bureaus and offices.

As Portland grew to over 600,000, broad sections of the city lacked representation at city hall. Portlanders sought structural changes and greater representation. Portland convenes an independent charter commission every 10 years to consider improvements to the city charter. The latest charter commission brought a proposal to voters in November 2022, where voters approved of increasing the number of elected representatives and forming voting districts for those representatives — now called councilors. Voters also approved a new election method, ranked-choice voting.

"Thank you to my colleagues Councilors Clark and Avalos," said Pirtle-Guiney, one of three councilors who represent District 2. "Stepping forward in a role like this is never something

someone undertakes lightly. I look forward to working with both of you, you bring invaluable experience to the council."

The new council president and vice president will lead the expanded, 12-member Portland City Council to develop policy, approve budgets and serve their constituents.

SOURCE City of Portland, Oregon

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