



The League of Women Voters of Portland

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DATE: April 29, 2016

TO: Multnomah County Charter Committee
Kirsten Leonard, chair

FROM: League of Women Voters of Portland
Margaret Noel, president
Kris Hudson

RE: Multnomah County Sheriff

The League of Women Voters of Portland urges the Multnomah County Charter Committee to recommend amending the charter to give the county commission the authority to appoint the sheriff. An appointed sheriff could be recruited nationwide, giving the county access to highly qualified candidates with extensive experience in both law enforcement and jail administration. Currently, candidates typically come from within the sheriff's office and have the backing of union members and other criminal justice officials. There is no guarantee candidates will have the high-level skills and experience needed to effectively manage such a complex organization.

If the sheriff were appointed, s/he would answer to the commission and be expected to work collaboratively with other members of the justice system, community organizations, and the public to improve jail operations and law enforcement practices. The commission would set policy and goals for the sheriff and s/he would be subject to dismissal for failure to perform.

In contrast, our elected sheriff answers only to the voters. S/he submits a proposed budget to the county chair to be included in the countywide budget. The sheriff only looks at the needs of the department while the chair and commissioners must consider the entire county's needs in reviewing the budget and allocating funds. Because the sheriff is elected, the commission has no oversight over the sheriff's department or how its resources are spent. The auditor can present findings on shortcomings in jail or law enforcement operations, but the sheriff alone decides whether those recommendations are implemented. Only union members and voters, who have little knowledge of the department, have any degree of oversight.

“To promote political responsibility through informed and active participation in government.”

There is a history of problematic issues under the current structure. Here are a few examples:

- In the late 1990s, the sheriff and other criminal justice officials were strong voices for constructing a new jail despite a 1995 audit identifying the dire need for a new courthouse. The Wapato Jail was placed on the ballot and built. Today it sits empty, used primarily as a set by the movie and television industry.
- The sheriff's office recently withheld release of an audit showing increased use of force against inmates over the last few years with black inmates disproportionately affected. It is not clear how or if the sheriff plans to address the concerns outlined in the report.
- The Multnomah County Corrections Grand Jury has reported more than once its concerns about the failure to maintain healthy staffing levels and the over reliance on overtime to cover vacant positions, among other things.

If you decide to recommend amending the charter and give voters the opportunity to make the sheriff's position appointed, we encourage you require an open selection process in which community members along with the chair and a commissioner screen and interview candidates. The chair should make the appointment with the advice and consent of the entire county commission.

The League of Women Voters of Portland thinks that an appointed sheriff answerable to both the commission and, through it, to Multnomah County residents will lead to more collaboration and accountability. We urge you to recommend amending the charter accordingly.