



ON THE BALLOT

A Report from the Bureau
of Governmental Research

ST. TAMMANY PARISH, MARCH 5, 2016

ST. TAMMANY PARISH CHARTER AMENDMENT: TERM LIMITS

What It Would Do

On March 5, 2016, voters will decide whether to limit Parish Council members to three consecutive four-year terms. If approved, the limits would go into effect with the terms that begin in January 2020.¹

Background and Analysis

Background. The parish charter, adopted in 1998, underwent review last year. To lead that effort, the Parish Council created the St. Tammany Parish Home Rule Charter Committee.² According to the committee's report, the topic that generated the most debate was term limits for council members.³

The committee ultimately recommended that a term limits proposition be presented to voters with three options that ranged from no term limits to limits of three consecutive four-year terms with the conversion of two council seats to at-large positions.⁴

The Parish Council initially refused to put any of the options on the ballot. Citizens responded in protest, with many saying they at least should be given the opportunity to vote on the term limits issue. The Parish Council reversed course and approved the present proposition, calling for a limit of three consecutive four-year terms, for the March ballot.⁵

Analysis. The arguments for and against term limits are well established and apply to the proposed amendment.

Proponents say the proposed term limits are necessary

to bring in new council members with fresh ideas. They say term limits prevent incumbents from amassing enough power through patronage, favors and campaign contributions to remain in office indefinitely. Term limits also serve as an institutional check should an officeholder's integrity and voters' vigilance fail. On this point, proponents refer to the parish's recent issues with government corruption stemming from long-serving elected officials who were not subject to term limits. Furthermore, term limits may encourage officeholders to make tough decisions that they would avoid if they were seeking re-election. Finally, the parish president is limited to three consecutive terms; the change would put the Parish Council on the same footing.

Opponents of the amendment say term limits are not necessary to elect new council members. Voters may re-elect or replace council members each election cycle. Opponents point to the frequent council member turnover of the last decade as evidence of incumbents with unsatisfactory records being voted out.⁶

Opponents also argue that term limits are inherently undemocratic and deprive citizens of the services of public officials with demonstrated abilities and institutional knowledge. They say voters should have the opportunity to elect the best-qualified candidate.

Finally, opponents say that term limits turn elected officials into lame ducks. They further argue that an elected official with the potential to remain in office may be more inclined to opt for long-term solutions rather than quick fixes.

BGR is generally supportive of term limits for local government executives and legislators.⁷

The mayor of New Orleans and the presidents of five other parishes in the eight-parish metro area are limited to two four-year terms.⁸ Council members in those jurisdictions also face term limits, with the exception of the St. James and St. Tammany Parish councils. In all of those instances of terms limits, the limits are two four-year terms, as opposed to the three four-year terms (12 years) in the current proposition.

As a result, even if voters approve the term limit proposition, St. Tammany will remain an outlier in the metro area. This is particularly true considering that the limits will not apply until after 2020, at which point current council members would still be eligible for three additional terms.

BGR Position

FOR. While the proposed three-term limit is not in line with the shorter two-term limits for most parish councils in the metro area, it is a step in the right direction. The proposed 12-year limit provides council members with more than enough time to make their contributions.

ENDNOTES

- 1 St. Tammany Parish Council, Ord. Cal. No. 5430, adopted September 23, 2015.
- 2 St. Tammany Parish Council, Res. No. C-4129AA, adopted August 7, 2014.
- 3 St. Tammany Parish Home Rule Charter Committee, *Recommendations to Amend the St. Tammany Parish Home Rule Charter*, March 31, 2015, pp. 16-18.
- 4 Ibid.
- 5 St. Tammany Parish Council, Res. No. C-4408, adopted September 23, 2015.
- 6 According to opponents, seven new council members were elected in 2000, four were elected in 2004, two were elected in 2008, and four were elected in 2012. See St. Tammany Parish Home Rule Charter Committee, Meeting Minutes Attachment submitted by Steve Stefancik, October 8, 2014.
- 7 See Bureau of Governmental Research, *On the Ballot*, November 6, 2012, and *Third Term Charter Amendment*, September 2001.
- 8 The metro area is comprised of Jefferson, Orleans, Plaquemines, St. Bernard, St. Charles, St. James, St. John the Baptist and St. Tammany parishes. The president of St. James Parish is not subject to term limits.

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