

Testimony given 12/3/03 before the Charter Review Commission

Mr. Chairman, Members of the Commission;

My name is Mark R. Adelman. I live at 3206 University Blvd. W., Kensington, MD 20895, where my wife, son and I have resided for over twenty years. I am the immediate past president of the Kensington Heights Citizens Association, am active in a number of civic organizations (focussing primarily on public schools), and am a full-time educator engaged in the teaching of medical students at the Uniformed Services University in Bethesda, MD. While the comments I shall make before you are entirely my own and not based on any polling of my colleagues (civic or professional), I feel certain they are shared by most of them. Regarding the elements of the Charter to which you are considering recommending changes:

1. I urge that the County Council be restructured to have nine single-district members and no county-wide seats. My reasons for this are essentially the same as those expressed by the speakers who have proceeded me so I will not elaborate except to comment that I do not believe single-district seats imply more parochial views than do county-wide seats and I do not feel that county wide seats "guarantee" that residents of a given district have "in effect" five representatives ("their own plus four county wide council members") as some have argued.
2. I believe that most Council Members already do full-time work and urge that the Charter be amended to state that Council Membership is a full-time job, that Council Members should be paid accordingly, and that they should not be allowed to have other paying jobs.
3. My most detailed comments reflect my concern about your suggestion that the Charter be amended to raise the number of petition signatures required to place a Charter Amendment on the ballot. As has been made clear by the preceding speakers, this issue has been discussed previously and the arguments against it have been clearly stated. Although 10,000 signatures is indeed a small percentage of the eligible voters in Montgomery County, it is an extremely significant percentage of those who take the franchise seriously enough to become informed about and vote on ballot issues. As someone who has participated in a petition drive to get a Charter Amendment on the ballot (we did not come even close to getting the required number of signatures), I can attest to the fact that it is NOT a trivial matter to bring Charter Amendments to referendum. I do, however, share your concern about the fact that it is "easier" to bring a Charter Revision to referendum (10,000 signatures) that to bring to referendum a proposal to repeal a specific law passed by the County Council (25,000 signatures required). I urge you to leave in place the 10,000 signature requirement for petitions to amend the Charter and, instead, to recommend that the Charter be amended to REDUCE to 10,000 the number of signatures required to petition to place a repeal referendum on the ballot. In an era when civic involvement in the social and political process is dwindling, it is essential that we do as much as possible to enable realistic

participation of informed voters in the process. Perhaps one anecdote from my own "failed" petition drive activity will be illuminating here. While soliciting signatures in front of a local supermarket, I was confronted by a gentleman who asked what we were doing and why. I explained that we were trying to make it easier for concerned citizens to bring to referendum a law that they felt was unwise and should not have been enacted by the County Council. The gentleman snorted that "we vote these people into office and we should let them do their job; if we don't like what they do, we should vote them out of office". From my point of view that is an unrealistic view of citizen responsibilities in a representative democracy. No elected official can be "perfect" and it is unreasonable to expect that ANY elected body will make NO mistakes. Voting one or more elected officials out of office because of one (or a few) "bad" votes is an extremely inefficient process. It is far better - in my opinion - to enable the electorate to force repeal of the occasional "bad" law via the referendum process. I urge you to recommend that the number of signatures required to bring such a repeal to referendum be REDUCED from 25,000 to 10,000. The lower number is still large enough, as I can personally attest, to minimize the chance that numerous frivolous repeal movements will be mounted.

Thank you very much for allowing me to speak before you and for considering my comments.

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