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## CITY OF CAMBRIDGE

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February 11, 2025

Cambridge City Council  
Cambridge City Hall  
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### **Re: Response to Elected Mayor Options**

To the Honorable, the City Council:

After the January 27, 2025, Special Meeting of the City Council, Councillor Sobrinho-Wheeler prepared alternative options for the selection of the mayor and requested input and feedback from the Law Department and Election Commission staff. Law Department and Election Commission staff reviewed the options Councillor Sobrinho-Wheeler prepared and provided feedback regarding the implications of the proposals to him and Co-Chairs Siddiqui and Toner. The following options presented in this memorandum reflect the options presented by Councillor Sobrinho-Wheeler with incorporated feedback from the Law Department, Election Commission staff, and the co-chairs.

Please note that these options have not been fully studied and that their feasibility and impact on voter behavior is unknown. Additional study may reveal further issues that could not have been anticipated without study and testing. The Election Commission also has not had the opportunity to review the proposals and provide input, depending on the direction the City Council wishes to proceed on this issue. When considering the options, the City Council should consider these overarching questions regarding any potential process.

1. What voting system are you using to select the mayor? Will it be ranked choice, or some other model?
2. How many ballots will be used? Will City Council and Mayoral race be on the same ballot or separate ballots?
3. Will there be an eligibility requirement to be mayor?
4. Will there be term limits for those serving as mayor? If so, what are those limits?

## **Option #1 - Ranked Choice**

### **Electoral process:**

To maintain the ranked choice system to elect the mayor, the election software could be run to elect nine councillors and then rerun to elect a single winner out of only those candidates who are eligible to become mayor. For example, if there are seven (7) eligible for mayor (councillors who have served at least one term) out of twenty-five (25) candidates on the ballot, the software would be rerun using only those seven names. If one of the seven indicated that they did not want to be mayor, then the software would be rerun using only those six candidates who expressed interest in running. The candidate who wins the rerun would be mayor elect.

### **Eligibility:**

Eligible candidates for mayor will indicate they are interested in both seats when picking up nomination paper before circulation to voters. The Candidate must have served at least one (1) term as city councillor to be eligible to be a candidate for mayor. Eligible candidates for mayor will indicate they are interested in both seats when picking up nomination paper before circulation to voters. It is a policy decision for the Council to decide what eligibility criteria to include in the Charter.

### **Ballot Wording:**

The eligible candidates would appear on the ballot with the words “Eligible for Mayor” next to their name and/or words “Candidate for Re-Election” depending on their eligibility. For example, a candidate who served a term, did not run for reelection, but qualifies to run again in the following election cycle would not be a “Candidate for Re-Election.” However, they would be allowed to have the “Eligible for Mayor” wording next to their name on the ballot because they served one term as councillor. It is a policy decision for the Council to decide what eligibility criteria to include in the Charter.

### **Term Limits:**

The mayor may serve no more than two (2) consecutive terms as mayor. After two terms the candidate would no longer be eligible to submit nomination papers for mayor and city councillor. The candidate would only be permitted to circulate papers for city council and appear on the ballot only as “Candidate for Re-Election” to the office as city councillor. Again, it is a policy decision for the Council about what term limits to include.

### **Implications of Option #1:**

By keeping ranked choice voting, it may be possible to conduct city council and mayoral races on the same ballot. However, this would have potential impacts on voter behavior, which is discussed further below. Employing ranked choice could also help to maintain continuity with the City’s proportional/ranked choice voting system with both races.

## **Option #2 – Adopt Another Process Without Ranked Choice**

### **Electoral process:**

The candidate receiving the highest first choice (#1) votes and is eligible to run for mayor and city councillor shall become mayor. Note that this selection method would not select the mayor



by ranked choice. This leads to issues in that you are running two elections with differing methodologies.

**Eligibility, ballot wording, term limits:**

Process and issues raised would be the same as Option #1.

**Implications of Option #2:**

Electing a mayor by having the candidate with the highest number of first choice votes conflicts with the City's proportional/ranked choice voting system because you are selecting the person with only the most first choice (#1) votes. As such, you are abandoning ranked choice voting in selecting the mayor while keeping it for selecting the councilors. The effect of Option #2 could fundamentally alter voter behavior in a more pronounced way than Option #1, which maintains ranked choice voting.

**Possible Issues with Options #1 and #2**

There may need to be separate ballots for mayor and city council races. The city's equipment and programming will need to be studied to determine feasibility.

Having a candidate's vote rank determine their eligibility for mayor could alter a voter's behavior that influences their vote, disfavoring candidates they would otherwise support. (E.g. "I support that candidate for city council, but now I will not rank them high because I don't like the idea of them being mayor.") Will voters feel disenfranchised when selecting a candidate for city council if they feel forced to rank them low because they do not want them to be mayor, or vice versa?

Other examples of possible altered voter behavior: If a voter wants to vote for only non-incumbents, then they will have no say in voting for who will be mayor. Or they will feel obligated to give one of the incumbents a ranking so that they do have a say in mayor, when otherwise they would not rank that candidate for just the city council. Or they might feel they have to give their number one vote to one of the incumbents eligible for mayor instead of a candidate they might prefer who is not eligible for mayor. The possibility of these changes giving incumbents advantages will need to be assessed for potential electoral and legal impacts.

Concerns have also been raised regarding the stipulation that to be eligible for the position of mayor, a candidate must have served at least one term as a City Councilor. No other elected office in the City has had such a prerequisite, which could impose limitations for new candidates, could negatively influence voter behavior, and potentially discourage candidates from running for office.

**Option #3 – Alternative Mayor Selection Process Not Codified in Charter**

**Electoral process:**

The mayor would be selected via Option #1 or Option #2, but the process would not be codified in the charter. Instead, the City Council would establish the process via another method, such as policy order, ordinance, the council's rules, or agreement between the


councilors. The City's charter would contain the same language where the city council would select the mayor via majority vote. See Section 97, City Plan E Charter. Additional language would be added, however, authorizing the City Council to select an alternative method for choosing the mayor if they wish.

**Implications of Option #3:**

Given that the City has never elected a mayor before in a ranked choice election, has not studied full implications regarding the proposal, and has not had the opportunity to meet with Election Commission, election experts, state officials, and the City's equipment vendors to assess feasibility or process, codifying a mayoral change in the charter now without further study could result in the discovery of issues and errors that could not be fixed without amending the charter again. Option #3 would avoid the potential dangers of codifying a process in the charter that has not been studied or tested.

In the event mayoral selection process had major issues, disenfranchises voters, or is legally challenged, it would be easier under Option #3 to revise the mayor selection process without having to amend the charter again. As such, Option #3 does offer a sort of "emergency fallback position," where the city council could choose the mayor from among the members through the traditional way in the event the system does not work or it was forced to abandon the new process. With additional time, the Election Commission could also work with the City's election vendors and ranked choice voting experts to get opinions and run the software with experimental ballots and nomination papers to see the impacts and to prevent voter disenfranchisement.

Very Truly Yours,

  
Megan B. Bayer  
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