

Statement of Robert Winters – May 3, 2006 Budget Hearing

I have recently raised on the web and in the local paper the issue of the genesis of the proposal for individual staff for city councillors. I have not yet addressed either the merits or the implementation of this proposal. So, here are some observations, questions, and suggestions for our elected officials, City administration, and residents to consider:

1. There was a time when our elected officials enlisted citizens to assist them in research matters relating to public policy. Cambridge is perhaps the best city in the United States in which to find experts in almost any matter that the City Council (or School Committee) may need to better understand. There is a wealth of evidence over the last 65 years showing how citizens have worked with elected officials in the development of public policy. If the City Council feels burdened by the research needs of its committees, there is an enormous pool of talent available at no cost. Currently, the City Council makes minimal use of this very available resource.
2. There was a time when councillors collaborated much more than they currently do in committee work and in the development of policies. A well-functioning City Council committee should delegate responsibilities so that each member masters certain facets of the tasks at hand and shares this knowledge with the rest of the committee. In effect, councillors serve as staff to each other. I would argue that it is better that elected officials educate themselves rather than relegating this to staff.
3. Are these jobs going to be publicly posted with a job description? Who will be doing the actual hiring? If Councillor Smith wants to hire Mr. Jones as personal staff, will the mayor have veto power over the hire? Does the Personnel Department have a role to play here or are these to be political hires? None of these details have been discussed publicly and they are important.
4. If these “research assistants” are to be hired, there should be policies and safeguards to ensure that they are not working on behalf of any councillor's political campaign. Otherwise, this proposal will have the effect of using taxpayer dollars to support the political campaigns of incumbent councillors. In fact, maybe it's time to consider a similar disqualification for staff in the Mayor's Office. A founding principle of Plan E government is the elimination of political patronage in favor of responsible, professional government. Some of us still believe in this ideal. At the very least, strong guidelines should be established for what is and is not permissible.
5. The existence of this proposal within the budget of the Mayor's Office is very strange indeed since it involves personnel for councillors, not the mayor. Should we not infer from this that the consensus of the councillors is that the City Council staff is not up to the task? If the job of councillor has changed so much, should there not be some discussion of revamping the Office of the City Council to better match the needs of the councillors? Why are these tasks being outsourced?
6. Some councillors have recently stated that the filing of City Council orders requesting information through the City Manager is not enough and that councillors would be better served by having their own staff to get this information. This strikes me as contrary to the intent of the Plan E Charter which dictates that all matters involving City personnel be directed through the Manager. One can easily imagine a scenario where each councillor has his or her personal staff contact City department heads for information rather than filing an Order as a body to get a common response. If the consensus is that the City Manager is being obstructive or extraordinarily slow in responding, shouldn't the City Council take more forceful action in holding the Manager accountable?
7. If the term “research assistant” is meant to be factual, then perhaps these RAs should be topic-specific so that we can have people who have some background or aptitude for the tasks at hand. If, for example, research in energy-related matters is what is needed, then someone with that knowledge would be ideal. Is any such protocol being discussed to ensure that the councillors and the taxpayers will get the best quality research for their tax dollars? I would hope that matters like scheduling and event planning will be handled by the City Council Office rather than by “research assistants.”
8. Several councillors have complained that e-mail has had a dramatic effect on the responsibilities of a city councillor due to the time consumption associated with responding to these messages. I don't doubt this. However, there are efficiencies that can make such tasks much easier. For example, if each councillor receives 100 e-mail messages on a particular topic, then rather than making 100 shallow replies, I would advise responding to ALL of the issues of substance raised by residents in a single, comprehensive message sent (using blind-carbon-copy) to all of the people who sent messages. Those of us in academics have been doing this for years. It's much more effective to craft comprehensive messages sent to the whole class rather than many nearly identical messages sent to individual students. There are MANY ways to be more effective in e-mail communication. Then again, if individual responses are seen as more valuable in securing potential votes in the next election, that's a choice each councillor must make on his or her own - independent of taxpayer-supported staff.

In summary, I am not questioning whether or not some changes in staffing are warranted. I am, however, asking that any such changes be done in the best interest of taxpayers and that City funds are never used to either directly or indirectly support the reelection efforts of elected officials.