

**Statement of Robert Winters – July 9, 2007 Gov't Operations Committee Hearing
[Regarding the City Council "Research Assistants"]**

Though I do believe there may be some need for additional research assistance for city councillors, the question is how this can best be accomplished. I do not believe that the provision of personal assistants for each elected councillor is the answer nor do I believe that the budget necessary to support up to 7 additional positions for this purpose is justifiable. There is a City Council Office and the question of how that office is staffed and whether that staff or the staff of the City Clerk's Office could be expanded for research purposes has not been addressed. The current provision of "research assistants" out of the Mayor's Office budget is, in my opinion, a political accommodation that was part of the behind-the-scenes process that delivered the votes to select the current mayor. There were no City Council orders, no committee hearings, and no recommendation from the City Manager to establish these positions. In fact, the last time the matter came up at a Government Operations Committee hearing in 2000, it was settled by a subsequent significant pay raise for city councillors in lieu of a provision for personal staff for councillors.

A well-functioning City Council committee will 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 ideally elected officials should educate themselves rather than relegating this to staff.

Are these "research assistants" publicly posted with a job description? Who does the actual hiring? Does the mayor have veto power over the hire? Does the Personnel Department play any role in these political hires? Is there a screening process to ensure that only qualified people are hired? Do affirmative action and other guidelines apply to these positions? None of these details have been discussed publicly and they are important.

There is already evidence that some of the "research assistants" who have been hired have been affiliated with the political campaigns of the councillors to whom they are assigned. What are the rules governing conflict of interest? Are these "research assistants" directly or indirectly working on behalf of the reelection campaigns of incumbent councillors? If so, this policy has the effect of using taxpayer dollars to support these political campaigns. This is a very disturbing development and there is, in fact, evidence that this is precisely the case.

Why is the budget for "research assistants" for city councillors in the budget of the Mayor's Office? Logically, one would suppose it would belong in the City Council budget. I am not proposing that this budget be relocated and institutionalized within the City Council budget – certainly not in its current form. I do have serious concerns that this Government Operations Committee hearing will be used to accomplish exactly that goal, namely to institutionalize a wasteful and politically motivated program that should never have been established in the first place.

I want to reiterate my belief that the Plan E Charter explicitly dictates that requests for information be directed, after a majority vote, to the City Manager in the form of a City Council Order. Councillors are free to research on their own any matter they wish, but the provision of City-funded staff to research this information seems like a clear circumvention of the Plan E Charter. If the consensus is that the City Manager is being obstructive or extraordinarily slow in responding to City Council Orders, then that matter should be addressed directly.

If the term "research assistant" is meant to be factual, these RA's should be topic-specific and they should report directly to City Council committees or to the whole Council rather than to individual councillors. In this regard, it seems clear that a more appropriate administrative way to do this would be to put the entire matter of "research assistance" in the hands of the City Clerk with an appropriate budget to fund these activities on the basis of need. Has any such protocol or alternative model been discussed either formally or informally within the Government Operations Committee? If the goal is to provide councillors and taxpayers with the best quality research for their tax dollars, then it would seem an obvious choice to rethink the current policy. To not do so seems like an acknowledgement of the purely political nature of the current policy.

In summary, I do not question whether some changes in staffing are warranted. I do, however, ask that any changes be done in the best interest of taxpayers and that City funds never used to either directly or indirectly support the reelection efforts of elected officials. I also would like to formally request the names of the people who have been hired under this policy and the councillors to whom they are affiliated. This should be a matter of public record.