



Strong Mayor Antes Up

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By Hoa Quach

Fewer than four years ago, Jerry Sanders became the mayor of San Diego. He was dealt a tough hand with a pension deficit, a budget deficit and a city council that was recouping from a corruption scandal disclosed in its chambers.

Then his wild card came into play.

A month into his term, Sanders role was redefined thanks to Proposition F. In the 2004 ballot measure, 51 percent of San Diego voters concluded the city needed a “strong mayor” making the governance style effective for a five-year-trial period on Jan. 1, 2006.

San Diegans and political experts are now determining how well Sanders has played the hand given to him, before voting on the governance’s permanency next year.

The measure that essentially made the mayoral office an executive office like that of the governor also allowed for the mayor to retire from the city council meetings. San Diego’s mayor was given veto and budgetary powers which were once shared with council members and discussed during meetings. Along with his new-found authority came increased scrutiny.

Glen Sparrow, public administration professor emeritus at San Diego State University and former member of Sanders’ transition team said it’s tricky to determine the quality of the new form of governance.

“It’s difficult, if not impossible to analyze how well it has worked because we haven’t had time to see how it works. We’ve always been in a crisis and never had a chance to see the actual system in play,” Sparrow said. “Ronne Froman [Sanders’ former chief of staff] once told me it was like performing open-heart surgery on a runner during a marathon.”

However, councilmember Carl DeMaio believes there has been an overall positive effect in terms of the mayoral office.

“The strong-mayor [governance] was meant to end the debate on who is in charge,” DeMaio said. “In the past when there was a crisis, you couldn’t find anyone to take responsibility. But now, there’s accountability - it has been a resounding success.”

In a poll taken by the National University System Institute for Policy Research, 49 percent (of Americans or San Diegans?) would vote to make the strong-mayor governance permanent, while 22 percent were “firmly opposed” to it.

The poll also examined the city’s Charter Review Committee - a temporary committee brought

forth to examine roles in the strong-mayor governance, among other issues. It found that 2 percent (of whom) “heard a lot” about the committee, while 49 percent “heard nothing.”

Aside from the Charter Review Committee, the Office of Independent Budget Analyst was formed and last year, became a permanent office. (The city also created two impermanent committees for the transition: City Council Transition Committee and the Citizens Advisory Committee.)

Institute president Erik Bruvold said the new form of governance allows for a healthy debate amid the mayor and the city council despite the fact that the mayor does not attend city council meetings.

“The strong-mayor governance sets up the natural, healthy conflict with the mayor and council in an open space,” Bruvold said.

But, ambiguity over who has what type of control over the budget has kept the city in a fiscal hole.

The research institute also released a policy brief on the budget process of 15 U.S. cities. Although all 15 cities examined had the same form of governance, the mayor’s budget powers fluctuate. According to the report that examined a mayor’s role in the budget process, 12 mayors are given “largely unfettered authority” over their cities’ budgets.

“For example, in the City of Houston, the Mayor has the authority to transfer funds to and from the spending plan accounts within any department without limitations and also discretion to move money between departments if the reduction is less than 5% from any single Budget Expenditure Account Group,” the report stated.

Mayors from Los Angeles and Oakland, are given “significant constraints,” while the mayor of Memphis has “moderate constraints.”

The mayor’s power in regards to budget changes has yet to be fully determined. DeMaio sees that as a problem.

“The financial problems haven’t been fixed as aggressively as he [Sanders] has wanted it to be,” DeMaio said.

As a whole, it is difficult to be precise how cogent the change in governance has been, said SDSU political science professor Brian Adams.

“There’s been very little research as to whether the strong-mayor is better because it’s hard to study the effects of distribution of power and the different clinical variables,” Adams said. “Right now, it’s still a hypothesis.”

Adams did point out, however, that a trend exists with strong-mayor governments in large cities and that the city-manager governance (San Diego’s prior system) is more common among small cities and towns. Despite the governance, Adams thought it was important to point out there is a “glitch, in terms of the actual governance, meaning there’s a problem with the “actual key players.”

And with a pension deficit of more than \$2 billion, a budget deficit of more than \$54 million (possibly \$60 million according to recent reports) and a global recession, all eyes are on the mayor. Sparrow

pointed out that Sanders lacks the caliber for these arduous times.

“He would have been really nice had there not been a crisis. But, I don’t think he’s the leader we need right now,” Sparrow said. “We need a more dynamic mayor that will get in front and provide leadership to his citizens.”

Tom Shepherd who was Sanders’ campaign manager and still considers Sanders a “client” disagrees. He said that the mayor has served the city well.

“Sanders has really taken charge and has really dug San Diego out of a fiscal hole,” Shepherd said.

Center on Policy Initiatives research and policy director Murtaza Baxamusa said he is simply concerned about the amount of openness of the government. Basically, he thinks Sanders plays his cards too close to the vest.

“There isn’t any meaningful participation in the local government,” Baxamusa said. “He [Sanders] has not kept his doors open to different types of opinions. He’s trying to be fair but he isn’t responding to the public. He’s been closed.”

Although Baxamusa believes Sanders isn’t responsive to the public, Sanders does have five people working in his communications office alone. This doesn’t include Gerry Braun, who is in charge of his “special projects,” according to a recent Voice of San Diego article.

DeMaio, however, said the problem of openness is that of the city council. In fact, the councilmember, who described an open government as his “passion,” said he would grade the city council a “D+” on openness.

Adrian Kwiatkowski of the Strong Mayor-Council Institute has researched different city governments for over 15 years and was a member of the city’s Charter Review Committee. He said the outcome of the governance is a two-way street.

“It’s a 50/50 situation - 50 based on the governance itself and 50 based on the honesty of people in power,” Kwiatkowski said.

“In the end, it isn’t a question of performance it’s a question of political desire.”

The proposition to make the strong-mayor governance permanent will be present on the 2010 ballot. Either outcome will be in effect in 2011. Sanders, who also serves as a board of director for Coronado’s First Bank, will continue to play the game with the hand dealt and the money given to him.

Jerry Sanders’ office did not respond to five requests for an interview.