

A Matter of Public Record

By Tiana Massaquoi

There's been discussion circulating about the upcoming City Council President selection and what "tradition" should apply. Let's look at what was actually decided through the democratic process.

In September 2024, the City Council passed Charter Amendment Resolution No. 24-19, which was introduced by Mayor Michael O'Connor and approved after extensive review by a Charter Review Committee.

This amendment specifically created a NEW process for selecting the City Council President, effective December 1, 2024. According to the resolution, "at its first meeting in December 2024, and thereafter on the first business day of a new term of office, the City Council shall elect from its membership a City Council President and Vice President."

This wasn't a sudden change—it was a deliberate, public process that went through proper channels. The amendment replaced the previous § 9, making that old section "of no further force or effect."

The current process isn't breaking tradition—it IS the new tradition, established through the proper democratic and legal process before any votes were cast.

When we discuss what the council "should" do, we need to start with what the actual governing documents say, not assumptions about how things used to work.

The voters elected their representatives. Those representatives amended the charter through proper procedures. Now that same council will follow the charter they themselves approved.

That's not changing the rules—that's following them.

The Role of City Council President: What Really Matters

Core Responsibilities to Consider:

When electing a council president, members should be asking themselves critical questions about governance, not politics:

1. Legislative Management

- Can this person effectively manage council meetings and keep discussions productive?
- Do they understand parliamentary procedure well enough to ensure fair process?
- Can they balance allowing robust debate while moving business forward?
- Will they ensure all voices are heard, even dissenting ones?

2. Relationship Building

- Can this person work with the Mayor's office, even when there's disagreement?
- Do they have the temperament to build consensus among diverse council members?
- Can they maintain professional relationships with department heads and city staff?
- Will they represent the council effectively in negotiations and intergovernmental relations?

3. Strategic Vision

- Does this person understand the city's long-term challenges and opportunities?
- Can they help the council set priorities and stay focused on them?
- Do they have the experience to anticipate consequences of policy decisions?
- Can they think beyond individual projects to systemic city governance?

4. Crisis Management

- When controversial issues arise, can this person keep the council functioning?
- Do they have the judgment to navigate politically sensitive situations?
- Can they maintain public confidence in city government during difficult times?
- Will they make decisions based on the city's best interests, not personal political calculation?

5. Institutional Knowledge

- Does this person understand how the city actually operates?
- Do they know the budget process, departmental structures, and existing policies?
- Can they hit the ground running, or will there be a steep learning curve?
- Have they demonstrated commitment to understanding the complexities of city government?

6. Communication Skills

- Can this person articulate the council's positions clearly to the public?
- Do they communicate effectively with colleagues in ways that build trust?
- Can they translate complex policy into language residents understand?
- Will they be accessible and responsive to community concerns?

7. Time and Commitment

- Does this person have the availability to fulfill the additional responsibilities?
- Will they prioritize council leadership when it conflicts with other obligations?
- Can they attend the extra meetings, events, and functions the role requires?
- Do they understand this is a service role, not just a title?

Why This Isn't a Popularity Contest

The president doesn't govern alone - they facilitate five or seven or nine other elected officials doing their jobs effectively. A popular president who can't build consensus accomplishes nothing. An effective president who isn't the most charismatic can help the entire council serve the city well.

Consider this:

Popularity is about individual appeal. It's about who gives the best soundbites, who has the most name recognition, who generates the most enthusiasm. Popularity wins elections - and it should. That's democracy.

Leadership is about collective function. It's about whether the council can work together, whether meetings are productive, whether the city's business gets done efficiently and transparently. Leadership makes governance work.

The council already has five (or seven) people who won popularity contests - that's how they all got elected. Every council member earned their seat by connecting with voters. Every council member brings constituent voices to the table.

But the presidency isn't another election - it's a job assignment.

Think of it this way: A hospital wouldn't make their most popular doctor the chief of surgery. They'd choose the surgeon who can manage the operating room, coordinate the surgical team, handle complications, and ensure every patient gets excellent care. Bedside manner matters for doctors; operational excellence matters for chiefs.

Similarly, a council shouldn't elect their president based solely on vote totals. They should elect the person who can:

- Run efficient meetings
- Build working relationships across ideological differences
- Navigate conflicts between council members
- Represent the council professionally in external relationships
- Understand complex policy well enough to guide productive discussion
- Make the entire council more effective

The voters chose the council members. Each member's electoral success gives them equal legitimacy at the table and equal voice in decisions. The council president doesn't get extra votes. They don't override the majority. They serve the council's collective function.

The council chooses its president - and they should choose based on who will help them govern most effectively.

What Effective Leadership Looks Like

An effective council president:

- Serves the institution, not themselves. They ensure fair process even when they disagree with the outcome. They protect minority voices even when they're in the majority. They maintain the council's credibility even when it's politically costly.
- Builds bridges, not fiefdoms. They find common ground between competing interests. They translate between different communication styles. They create space for compromise without sacrificing principle.
- Focuses on outcomes, not optics. They measure success by what gets done, not by how many headlines they generate. They're willing to work behind the scenes if that's what moves things forward.
- Empowers colleagues, doesn't eclipse them. They create opportunities for other council members to lead on their priorities. They share credit. They make the whole council look good, not just themselves.

- Maintains perspective. They remember they're one voice on the council, with one vote. They don't confuse the role's visibility with having more power. They stay humble.

The Real Question Before the Council

When council members enter that vote, they shouldn't be asking: "Who got the most votes?" They already know who won their races.

They should be asking:

- "Who will help us work together most effectively?"
- "Who has the experience to navigate the challenges we'll face?"
- "Who will represent our collective decisions well, even when they personally disagree?"
- "Who will make me a better council member?"
- "Who will help this council serve our city most effectively?"

Those questions require looking beyond popularity to leadership capacity, beyond vote totals to governance skills, beyond individual appeal to collective function.

A Final Thought

The best council president might be the person who got the most votes. Electoral success can indicate many qualities useful for leadership - constituent connection, communication skills, community trust, political acumen.

But electoral success doesn't automatically equal leadership effectiveness. And if the council determines that another member is better equipped to facilitate their collective work, that's not disrespecting the voters - that's the council doing exactly what the charter empowers them to do: making the best decision for effective governance.

The voters chose the players. The charter asks the players to choose their captain. Both choices matter. Neither is more legitimate than the other. They're just different decisions, serving different purposes, in a well-designed democratic system.

Title: Resolution to Amend the Charter of the City of Frederick

Introduced by: Mayor Michael O'Connor

Date: September 19, 2024

Action: Approved

Summary: This resolution amends the Charter of the City of Frederick regarding the structure of the City government, selection of a City Council president and filling of a vacancy in the office of Mayor. These amendments are made following extensive review by a Charter Review Committee appointed by the Mayor.

THE BOARD OF ALDERMEN OF THE CITY OF FREDERICK

CHARTER AMENDMENT RESOLUTION NO. 24-19

A RESOLUTION concerning the executive and legislative branches of the government of The City of Frederick

FOR the purpose of separating certain executive and legislative functions; providing for the selection of a City Council president and vice president; providing for the filling of a vacancy in the office of the Mayor; and generally relating to the government of The City of Frederick.

BY adding

Art. II, § 9.1 of the Charter of The City of Frederick

BY adding

Art. II, § 16.1 of the Charter of The City of Frederick

BY adding

Art. II, § 17.1 of the Charter of The City of Frederick

BY adding

Art. IV, § 20.1 of the Charter of The City of Frederick

SECTION I: BE IT RESOLVED, ENACTED, AND ORDAINED BY THE MAYOR AND BOARD OF ALDERMEN OF THE CITY OF FREDERICK, That the Charter of The City of Frederick, as the same was adopted by the General Assembly of Maryland in Chapter 539 of the laws of 1951, as thereafter amended, be amended by adding Article II, § 9.1 to read as follows:

§ 9.1. City Council President and Vice President.

- (a) As of December 1, 2024 this section will replace § 9 of this article, which will be of no further force or effect.
- (b) Initially at its first meeting in December 2024, and thereafter on the first business day of a new term of office, the City Council shall elect from its membership a City Council President and Vice President who serve for the entirety of that term. The City Council President shall preside over the City Council, vote on all questions, and perform such other duties as may be prescribed by law. The Vice President will take the place of the President should they not be able to perform their duties.

SECTION II: AND BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED, ENACTED, AND ORDAINED BY THE MAYOR AND BOARD OF ALDERMEN OF THE CITY OF FREDERICK, That That the Charter of The City of Frederick, as the same was adopted by the General Assembly of Maryland in Chapter 539 of the laws of 1951, as thereafter amended, be amended by adding Article II, § 16.1 to read as follows:

§ 16.1. Resolutions.

- (a) As of December 1, 2024, this section will replace § 16 of this article, which will be of no further force or effect.
- (b) Except as otherwise required by law, the City Council may take action by approving a resolution. Subsections (c) and (d) of this section do not apply to resolutions to amend this charter.
- (c) A resolution may be passed by the City Council at the meeting at which it is introduced. Every resolution passed by the City Council will be delivered promptly by the City Clerk to the Mayor. The Mayor shall either approve and sign a resolution or veto it. The Mayor shall return a resolution, indicating approval or veto, to the City Clerk within two weeks after delivery. If the Mayor vetoes a resolution, the Mayor shall attach a written statement of the reasons for the veto.
- (d) The City Clerk shall deliver promptly to the City Council a resolution vetoed by the Mayor (including the written statement of the reasons for the veto). A resolution vetoed by the Mayor will not become a law unless it is passed by a favorable vote of two thirds of the total number of elected members of the City Council within 30 days after the date it is returned to the City Council by the City Clerk.

SECTION III: AND BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED, ENACTED, AND ORDAINED BY THE MAYOR AND BOARD OF ALDERMEN OF THE CITY OF FREDERICK, That the Charter of The City of Frederick, as the same was adopted by the General Assembly of Maryland in Chapter 539 of the laws of 1951, as thereafter amended, be amended by adding Article II, § 17.1 to read as follows:

§ 17.1 Official actions.

- (a) As of December 1, 2024, this section will replace § 17 of this article, which will be of no further force or effect.
- (b) An action approved by the City Council and not otherwise addressed in this Charter is called an "official action".
- (c) Every official action passed by the City Council will be delivered promptly by the City Clerk to the Mayor. The Mayor shall either approve and sign an official action or veto it. The Mayor shall return an official action, indicating approval or veto, to the City Clerk within two weeks after delivery. If the Mayor vetoes an official action, the Mayor shall attach a written statement of the reasons for the veto.

- (d) The City Clerk shall deliver promptly to the City Council an official action vetoed by the Mayor (including the written statement of the reasons for the veto). An official action vetoed by the Mayor will not become a law unless it is passed by a favorable vote of two thirds of the total members elected to the City Council within 30 days after the date it is returned to the City Council by the City Clerk.

SECTION IV: AND BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED, ENACTED, AND ORDAINED BY THE MAYOR AND BOARD OF ALDERMEN OF THE CITY OF FREDERICK, That the Charter of The City of Frederick, as the same was adopted by the General Assembly of Maryland in Chapter 539 of the laws of 1951, as thereafter amended, be amended by adding Article V, § 20.1 to read as follows:

§ 20.1 Vacancy in the office of Mayor.

- (a) This section will go into effect on December 1, 2024 at which time it will replace § 20 of this article, which will be of no further force or effect.
- (b) A vacancy in the office of Mayor must be filled in accordance with this section.
- (c) If the individual elected as Mayor dies, resigns, or becomes disqualified after the general election but before taking office, the newly elected City Council, after taking office, shall select from its membership an acting Mayor to serve until a new Mayor is elected in accordance with this subsection. A City Council member retains a vote on the City Council while serving as acting Mayor under this subsection. Within 90 days after the individual's death, resignation, or disqualification, the City will conduct a special election for the purpose of electing a new Mayor. Within 30 days after the special election, the new Mayor shall take office in the same manner as regularly elected City officials.
- (d) If the Mayor dies, resigns, or becomes disqualified after taking office but at least 12 months before the next general election, the President of the City Council shall serve as the acting Mayor until a new Mayor is elected in accordance with this subsection. The President retains a vote on the City Council while serving as acting Mayor under this subsection. Within 90 days after the Mayor's death, resignation, or disqualification, the City will conduct a special election for the purpose of electing a new Mayor. Within 30 days after the special election, the new Mayor shall take office in the same manner as regularly elected City officials.
- (e) If the Mayor dies, resigns, or becomes disqualified less than 12 months before the next general election, the President of the City Council shall serve as the acting Mayor until a new Mayor is elected by general election in accordance with this article. The President retains a vote on the City Council while serving as acting Mayor under this subsection.

SECTION V. AND BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED BY THE BOARD OF ALDERMEN OF THE CITY OF FREDERICK, That if any provision of this resolution or the Charter adopted thereby, or the application thereof to any person or circumstance, is held invalid for any reason, such invalidity shall not affect the other provisions or any other application of this resolution or the Charter which can be given effect without the invalid provisions or application, and to this end, all the provisions of this resolution and of the Charter are hereby declared to be severable.

SECTION VI. AND BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED BY THE BOARD OF ALDERMEN OF THE CITY OF FREDERICK, That the date of adoption of this resolution is September 19, 2024, and the amendment to the Charter of The City of Frederick hereby enacted shall become effective on November 8, 2024, unless a proper petition for a referendum is filed on or before October 29, 2024 as provided in the Annotated Code of Maryland, Local Government Article, § 4-304. A complete and exact copy of this resolution shall be continuously posted at City Hall, Frederick, Maryland, until October 29, 2024, and a fair summary of the proposed Charter amendments contained in this resolution shall be published in a newspaper of general circulation in The City of Frederick not fewer than four times at weekly intervals within a period of at least 40 days starting immediately after the adoption of this resolution.

SECTION VII. BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED BY THE BOARD OF ALDERMEN OF THE CITY OF FREDERICK, That all sections of the Charter or any ordinance or parts of sections of the Charter or any ordinance inconsistent with the provisions of this resolution be and the same are hereby repealed to the extent of such inconsistency.

SECTION VIII. BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED BY THE BOARD OF ALDERMEN OF THE CITY OF FREDERICK, That the Mayor of The City of Frederick shall send to the Department of Legislative Services the complete text hereof; the date of the referendum election, if any; the number of votes cast for and against the questions contained in the Charter amendment, whether in the legislative body or in referendum; and the effective date of the Charter amendment.

APPROVED: 9/20/2024 _____ PASSED: 9/19/2024 _____



Michael C. O'Connor, Mayor



Michael C. O'Connor, President
Board of Aldermen

Approved for Legal Sufficiency:



Rachael Nessum
City Attorney