

# Report on Wilmington City Council size recommends status quo

Christina Jedra, The News Journal Published Sept. 6, 2017 | Updated 1:06 p.m. ET Sept. 7, 2017

***The chairman disagreed and suggested council be cut in half.***

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## STORY HIGHLIGHTS

- The commission's findings will be discussed at a public meeting on Friday at 5 p.m. in council chambers.
- Council staff did not make the report available to the public.

A commission tasked with assessing Wilmington City Council's size and structure is recommending that the council maintain its size of 13 members, but eliminate the required non-Democrat position and establish staggered terms, according to a report obtained by The News Journal.

The majority of the Council Organization Commission, [appointed in March by Council President Hanifa Shabazz](#), calls mostly for the status quo, said commission member and former Mayor James Baker.

"We could not see a rationale for changing the numbers, reducing or enlarging it," he said. "It's not a great amount of savings if we reduce the number."

The commission's findings will be discussed at a public meeting on Friday at 5 p.m. in the council chambers, according to a council news release.

The report was submitted to the council on Aug. 30, but council staff did not make a copy available to the public or The News Journal, despite repeated requests. Nonetheless, the newspaper obtained a copy of the report.



Wilmington City Council President Hanifa Shabazz takes part in a listening tour. (Photo: William Bretzger/The News Journal)

The group was instructed to determine if the number of council members was reasonable in relation to the population, if the structure of eight district seats and four at-large members was appropriate, whether the duties of the president constitute a part-time or full-

time position, whether her salary level is appropriate and the potential costs and benefits of staggered terms.

The commission was established by a resolution passed in June 2016. A review of the council size and structure had not been conducted in decades. The five members were Baker, former District 7 City Councilman Paul Ignudo Jr., local lawyer Samuel Moultrie, regional sales director Charles Fleming Jr. and retired fund development professional Maryann Miller.

"I look forward to a robust discussion of the Commission's findings as well as taking the appropriate steps to adopt and implement their recommendations," Shabazz said in a statement.

The council is currently made up of 13 members — eight district seats, four at-large members who represent the city as a whole, plus President Shabazz. They are elected to four-year terms and work part time. Members make \$28,205; the president pro tempore, \$32,030; and the president, \$35,650, according to fiscal year 2018 salary data.

*Draft Internal Working Document*

<i>Relative Salary &amp; Benefit Costs - City Council</i>	<b>Council Member</b>	<b>President Council</b>	<b>President Pro-Tempore</b>	<b>Finance Chairman</b>
Salary	\$28,205	\$35,650	\$32,030	\$33,150
Pension	\$2,115	\$2,528	\$2,402	\$1,486
FICA	\$1,629	\$2,178	\$1,941	\$2,184
MED Tax	\$381	\$509	\$454	\$511
Healthcare (Medical & Dental)	\$27,505	\$27,505	\$27,505	\$27,505
Life Ins	\$164	\$207	\$186	\$192
Pension Healthcare	\$3,000	\$3,000	\$3,000	\$3,000
<b>Total Salary &amp; Benefits</b>	<b>\$62,989</b>	<b>\$71,577</b>	<b>\$67,518</b>	<b>\$69,028</b>

*Assumption: Assume all has family plan for healthcare cost, figures from FY2018 Budget*

  

<i>Other Relative Cost - City Council</i>	<b>Council Member</b>	<b>President Council</b>	<b>President Pro-Tempore</b>	<b>Finance Chairman</b>
Office Supplies (pp per year)	\$110	\$110	\$110	\$110
Food/Beverages (pp per year)	\$500	\$500	\$500	\$500
Cellphone (pp per year)	\$500	\$500	\$500	\$500
Motor Vehicle (maintenance,gas,parking gate card,etc.) (per year)	\$0	\$9,454	\$0	\$9,454
<b>Total Other Costs</b>	<b>\$1,110</b>	<b>\$10,564</b>	<b>\$1,110</b>	<b>\$10,564</b>

*Assumptions: assume all Council Members have a cell phone, assume both President & Finance Chairman has a city vehicle, President oversees grant funds for City Council.*

*Please note that grant funds are not listed because these funds will exist based upon the dynamics of the community, and is not part of cost to be a Council Member, and likewise for Council staff.*

A photo of Wilmington City Council's Organization Commission shows council member salaries and benefits, including health care, phones, food, and in some cases, cars. (Photo: Christina Jedra/The News Journal)

Council members have debated whether the body should cut seats. Councilman Samuel L. Guy [advocated in January](#) to maintain the current membership, warning that change would cause tension between members, but Councilwoman-at-large Loretta Walsh has been vocal about her support for a reduction, arguing that Wilmington's roughly 70,000 residents are "overly represented."

The majority of the organization commission said a reduction would "not provide any justifiable financial benefit and would be only symbolic in nature," the report states. If the council eliminated one member, it would be a savings of \$64,109, according to the report.

### Is the Wilmington City Council – with 13 members – too large?

No  Yes

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"The political difficulty associated with redistricting and redrawing of councilmanic districts would pose significant burdens on the Council and its constituents," the report said.

However, the chair of the commission disagreed. In a dissent included in the report, Samuel Moultrie wrote that maintaining the status quo of 13 members "without any reasonable explanation or purpose" is not good enough. He recommended reducing the council to seven members.



Samuel Moultrie (Photo: Submitted)

Moultrie said Wilmington's population has decreased from the 95,000 people it had in 1960, around the time the current structure was adopted. And there are no indications the city will experience a population boom soon.

He cited several cities of comparable size, including Trenton and Scranton, Pennsylvania, that have between five and seven council members.

There are 5,000 to 6,000 constituents per council member, Moultrie said, making Wilmington residents "overrepresented." He said this is "inefficient, possibly ineffective, and may lead to inadequate representation of constituents."

A smaller number of council members would allow a more "fulsome and effective debate" during meetings, less time and effort expended on unimportant issues, increased ease in building consensus and a stronger political bond "to better serve as a check against the mayor and various executive branches of government in the city," Moultrie wrote.

**STORY: [Wilmington paid pension of dead woman for 20 years, loses \\$73,000](#)**

**STORY: [Wilmington clerk dismissed dozens of parking tickets for himself, others](#)**

The chairman did not agree with his colleagues that the financial benefits of member reduction would be strictly symbolic.

"Elected officials have a duty and responsibility to expend each and every taxpayer dollar in the most effective and efficient manner possible," he wrote.

Reducing the number of council members from 13 to seven would represent an annual savings of \$383,535, Moultrie said.

"This amount, while minimal compared to the overall city budget, is hardly negligible to the 46.5 percent of households in Wilmington with an annual income of \$34,999 or below," he said.



The Wilmington City Council public safety committee discusses the proposed Gun Offender Registration Act, which would require all Wilmington residents convicted of a gun crime in the state of Delaware to register with the police within five business days of their release from incarceration. Pictured: Council members Vash Turner, Bob Williams, Ciro Adams and President Hanifa Shabazz. (Photo: CHRISTINA JEDRA/THE NEWS JOURNAL)

Regarding the current arrangement of district and at-large seats, the majority of the commission recommended no changes.

However, members made a "supplemental recommendation" to eliminate the city charter's requirement that one at-large seat must be filled by a member of the "minority party." This rule ensures that at least one non-Democrat gets a seat in the blue-heavy city. **Ciro Adams is the council's sole Republican.**

The commission majority believes this law is at odds with the charter's requirement that the at-large members be "elected by the people from the city at large," the report states.

Chairman Moultrie disagreed in light of his earlier dissent and recommended the city map be redrawn by an independent committee of unelected officials. **He suggested four council districts, equal by population, two at-large members and one president.**

Moultrie also opposed the majority's recommendation to eliminate the rule that guarantees non-Democrats a seat saying it was "not within the purview" of their assignment, the report said.

The commission was unanimous in recommending that the duties and salary of the council president are appropriate as-is.

"We did not want to create an extraordinary conflict within the council by saying yeah, they should be full-time," Baker said.



**Former Mayor James Baker** (Photo: GARY EMEIGH/THE NEWS JOURNAL)

In addition to monetary savings, the part-time nature of the council ensures access to a more diverse field of professionals for election and the advantage of talents and experience from outside city government, the report states.

"The commission sees no reason to deviate from these principles for the Council President," the report said.

Commission members also agreed that the council should stagger elections. Currently, the city charter calls for council elections on the same day every four years on which general elections are held, the report said.

The arrangement sometimes leads to an influx of new blood, as there was this year with [seven members who had not served in the previous year](#).

"It is commonly known that newly elected members are forced to rapidly learn and absorb an extraordinary amount of information," the report said.

Staggered terms would ensure "a measured transfer of institutional knowledge," according to the commission.

The group suggested that the council president and six of the eight councilmanic districts hold elections on or during presidential election years. The remaining two councilmanic districts and the four at-large members should hold elections on an "off" year, the report said.

If Moultrie's seven-member council idea were approved, he would recommend the president and two of the four districts hold elections as usual and the other two districts and two at-large seats hold elections on the "off" year, according to the report.

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## Is the Wilmington City Council – with 13 members – too large?

Yes 81.82% (144 votes)

No 18.18% (32 votes)

Total Votes: 176  
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### Tom Mitten ·

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While I have yet to read the full report, of all of the information contained in this story, no one seems to feel that "at large" members are certainly candidates for elimination. To her credit, at-large council member Loretta Walsh advocates reducing the size of council, but didn't specifically say to do so by eliminating at-large members.

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