

The Charter – By Senator Johnny Grant and Representative Doug Holt

Last week, Madison really showed its character, the reason why it's on or near the top of many lists of the best places to live in America. The public hearing on the charter change, while about a topic that brought many passionate opinions, was respectful, courteous and straightforward in its focus on the issue.

We first would like to thank the citizens of Madison for that display of gentility, and then explain our decision process on the charter change amendments. We had been quite focused on the legislative session until about two weeks before we called for the hearing. It then became clear that this was a very serious issue. We needed time to research the facts, and get a really firm idea of what the majority of the city wanted. We realize that calling for the hearing was frustrating, but we felt that this was the best way to really hear from the people. When we are away at the Capitol, it is so easy to have our impressions pushed in all kinds of directions. We knew we had to hear firsthand.

From the outset, we agreed that this must not be a case of the legislative delegation imposing a solution on the city. We attempted to throw some ideas out in search of a possible compromise, but certainly didn't present them as requirements. We simply wanted to act in the manner that would produce the government Madison desires; and one which would function well for this city, long after the present office holders are gone.

Once we had obtained a firm legal opinion that the charter did allow the Mayor a vote, we realized that this could expose the city to a potential deadlock vote, with no legal means of resolving the problem. We knew that, no matter what was done with the charter otherwise, this flaw had to be resolved.

After the meeting, it was clear that a great majority of those who came and spoke so eloquently simply wanted a charter that made the city government work the way they had understood it to for decades – even though it was only by precedent of how previous Mayors had exercised their powers. So, we took this as a mandate to pass the charter as requested by the City Council.

We truly hope that, having corrected the flaw in the charter, the Council and Mayor will be able to put this issue behind them, and move forward together with the business of Madison.

There was one discordant note, outside of the issue of the charter, which we heard at the meeting. This was concern expressed by some of the Mayor's supporters that their issues have not been addressed with sufficient attention by the City Government in the past. We were heartened to hear several of the Council members express a willingness to engage those concerns more fully, and even to consider if a locally organized citizen's commission review of the charter might be in order.

Once again, we wish to thank the citizens and officials of Madison, and commend them for coming together to resolve this disagreement in a way the city's namesake would have applauded. We all saw democracy at its best that night.