

Sunday Editorial

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Ineffective

City council needs new face lift

Nearly 15 years after it was adopted, it is clear that the strong mayor-city council form of government does not function. We can't resist calling City Hall "malfunction junction."

As originally conceived by the late Tulsa attorney John Rogers and a young band of his acolytes in 1958, it should work well.

But the current form is different in important ways from the original charter rejected by voters in 1959. It was changed minimally for elections in 1969 and 1973, but was again rejected.

All those previously proposed charters were indeed strong mayor-city council forms but they differed from the charter approved in 1989 in one important aspect.

All nine councilors in the current government are elected by district, creating, as we see clearly today, ward politics of the worst kind.

In the original proposal in 1959, five of the nine members were to be elected at-large with four members by district. The idea was to have five councilors responsible to all Tulsa voters. The district councilors would have larger districts and also be responsible to more voters than in the current form.

The 1969 version called for four councilors at-large and five by district. The 1973 version enlarged the council to 11 members with three elected at-large.

By the time the current charter was approved in 1989, the NAACP was threatening a lawsuit, contending black candidates could not be elected under the old city commission form.

This, despite the fact that Ronald Young, a black man, had been elected citywide twice as finance commissioner. The second time, he led the ticket and did worse in the black precincts than anywhere.

Agitators for the charter change used the NAACP threat and another one, the Mobile, Ala., case, to convince city leaders, including the World, to adopt the new council form.

Mobile had a three-member city commission, all elected at-large. Blacks there sued and a lower court held in their favor. The case was on appeal to the federal circuit court and Tulsans were warned that their city was in danger of having a government change decided by judges instead of the people.

Against this backdrop, the charter change was approved. The election by district, or ward, probably was pushed a bit by the lawsuit. The appeals court decided in favor of Mobile, however, and the courts probably would have upheld Tulsa's old commission form.

One thing about the current squabbling on the city council: It is not partisan. Three Republicans have teamed with two Democrats to control the council. They call themselves the Reform Alliance. Others who have seen them in action call them "the gang of five" or "the wrecking crew," or the "Town Clowncil" or the "Keystone Council" or the "five stooges." Four of them were elected last spring, most by modest margins in a very light voter turnout. One holdover turned against his former colleagues to form the majority. The minority consists of three Republicans and one Demo-

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crat.

Which brings up a favorite topic when charter reform is considered; the council ought to be non-partisan so that Republican and Democratic leaders will work together to find and finance substantial candidates for the council, regardless of party.

In a perfect world, a city-county government ought to be developed, but such an idea is anathema to the robust communities around Tulsa in Tulsa County. The sad fact is that a city-county form requires state enabling legislation which is almost impossible to get approved because of the enormous lobbying power of elected county officials in the state Legislature.

Charter change without City Council support is not likely and even if the charter were changed it wouldn't take effect until 2006.

That means the city is stuck with five councilors who got a grand total of 6,755 votes. Now they run a city of 400,000 people.

When the average voter turnout per council district is but 2,500 or so, outsiders can shape the election with relatively small amounts of money and that is what happened last spring. Tom Baker, Tulsa's former fire chief and one of the most knowledgeable and reasonable of councilors, barely won with a 24-vote margin.

There was a concerted effort to beat all the sitting councilors because of zoning decisions at 51st and 71st Streets and Harvard Avenue. In both cases, councilors had little choice under the law but to approve the zoning changes.

A slight change in the way Tulsa elects a council would make it much harder for a few well-heeled activists to shape the election.

A change to five at-large councilors would mean a majority of the council would be responsible to all voters instead of 1,500 or so. As it is, the council is charged with considering what is best for Tulsa, but we have seen since the beginning that the councilors are far more worried about purely parochial matters. And why not? That's where they get elected. In effect, they are elected to try to put their district ahead of the overall welfare of the city.

That's a poor way to run a large city. Mayor Bill LaFortune does indeed have the administrative power to play hardball politics with roads, street lights and other city services with the council, but he is too honorable for that kind of petty politics. But other mayors might.

Surely the citizens of Tulsa don't want a city government of ward politics and punitive mayoral actions. But that's the way we are headed. Ward-healers and vindictive mayors? Here in River City? Citizens ought to be outraged.

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"IT'S OKLAHOMA INSURANCE COMMISSIONER CARROLL FISHER... SHOULD I TELL HIM HE DOESN'T HAVE A PRAYER?"

Politics as usual

Coburn supports surfing museum, but not state roads

JANET
PEARSON

Editorial writer

Which U.S. Senate candidate would in fact be the most effective advocate for improving Oklahoma's transportation system? U.S. Rep. Brad Carson or former U.S. Rep. Tom Coburn?

The two have sparred over their transportation stances for weeks now, and it's tough for voters to evaluate the claims.

A closer examination of public comments and congressional votes is enlightening — and reveals that Coburn is not as averse to voting for "pork" as he would have us believe.

In fact, Coburn has voted for bills containing funding for such projects as a wine country visitor's center in California, a theater renovation in Vermont and a Hawaiian museum that features an exhibit on the history of surfing.

He's also voted for parks and "open space" projects in Pennsylvania, acquisition and remodeling of an "Old Marketplace" in Ohio, a trailhead in Louisiana, a Chicago museum submarine restoration project, improvements to the Mississippi River Museum and Discovery Center, and funds for the Alaska Native Heritage Center.

But when it comes to Oklahoma's needs, he adopts his usual self-righteous stance, saying things such as, "We do not need more dependency on the federal government," and, "We've got too much federal government money and not too little." Perhaps he believes Oklahomans fritter away federal funds allocated for such programs as Medicare, Social Security, food stamps, health care, education and military bases.

But, back to the transportation issue. Coburn has called the federal transportation funding process "an often corrupt and wasteful system," and claimed that while a congressman, his "fighting against wasteful pork projects ... helped Oklahoma receive over \$100 million in extra transportation funds since 1998."

His basis for this claim is tough to follow. He claims he pushed for, and in fact he did support, legislation that would have returned to Oklahoma 100 percent of the gasoline tax dollars raised here. At the time, Oklahoma was getting only 79 cents of every dollar sent to Washington.

Predictably, these measures failed; in fact, politically, they never had a chance, which is true of many of the quixotic stances Coburn espouses. More populous states tend to get more of the transportation funds because of extreme needs, while impoverished states such as Oklahoma get proportionately more funding for other important needs, such as elderly



The World published this cartoon when Reps. Tom Coburn and Steve Largent rejected road money for Oklahoma.

services, Medicare, Social Security, education and hunger.

Though Coburn's 100-percent gasoline-tax return measure failed, he had the chance to support a higher return for the state in 1998, when the new federal omnibus transportation bill was proposed. That measure called for raising the minimum return rate to 90.5 percent — a major improvement for states such as Oklahoma. But did Coburn support it? No; yet he continues to claim he helped bring home the \$100 million in new funds that measure provided for Oklahoma.

In explaining his vote against the 1998 federal highway bill, his Web site said rather than "working" a corrupt and unconstitutional system, his goal was to improve the system "so it works for ordinary people." What that stance ensured was that available highway funds would go to other states.

He claims the bill was bloated with "pork" projects selected to "make a politician look good and to enhance their political career."

When Coburn explained his position on the 1998 highway bill on the House floor, he said the American public finds the funding process "sick, dirty and corrupt."

"We cannot afford to play games with the public's money and more importantly we cannot afford to play games with the public's trust. ... That is why I and several of my colleagues turned down funds in this year's highway transportation bill."

Coburn says state transportation officials should determine project need, and in his Senate bid, he has said that "anything this state's Department of Transportation tells me is a priority, I'm going to do."

But when an opponent does exactly that — pushes the recommendations of state

transportation leaders — Coburn calls it pork.

Typically, congressmen select projects for funding from state leaders' recommendations. Carson has attempted to do that in the selection of projects he wants funded, among them, highways from Antlers to Broken Bow and from Pawhuska to Bartlesville; a new interchange in McAlester on U.S. 69; and reconstruction of a U.S. link from I-44 to the Port of Catoosa.

While Coburn rails long and hard against "pork," his record suggests he finds some pork less offensive than others. He managed to hold his nose and vote for bills containing the aforementioned theater renovation, wine country project, and Hawaiian museum — among many other similar projects.

A safe bet for why Coburn voted for these bills is that they accomplished a broader goal he supports. One bill, for example, made huge cuts in many government programs — such as health, labor, education, social services and law enforcement — while still containing many little local pet projects.

So like any seasoned politician, Coburn can come up with a rationale for what he does. Which is exactly the point. Despite his protests, Coburn is a lot like all the rest. It's kind of ironic: He insists he is more ethical and virtuous than the politics-as-usual crowd he seeks to turn out, but when he trots out his self-serving, twisted rationalizations, he sounds just like them.

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Oklahoma Department of Transportation workers repair a pothole on the Broken Arrow Expressway near the Sheridan Road exit.

Tulsa World file