



In the Know: Term Limits for City Council Members: A “Goode” or Bad Idea?

At Philadelphia City Council’s first formal session of 2010 – January 28 – Philadelphia City Councilman W. Wilson Goode, Jr. introduced a Resolution to limit City Council members to three consecutive terms. Council members can currently run for reelection as many times as they want.

The Committee of Seventy has not yet taken a formal position on term limits for City Council. Like other Philadelphians, we will be weighing the pros and cons. Here is some background information to get the debate moving.

What does Councilman Goode’s Resolution say?

Councilman Goode’s Resolution limits members of City Council, the legislative arm of city government, to three consecutive four-year terms.

Would that be a permanent change?

Yes and no. The Resolution is a proposed amendment to Philadelphia’s Home Rule Charter, the city’s permanent governing document. So if it is passed by Council, and then by the voters – which is required for all City Charter amendments – it would be a permanent change. But the Resolution contains an escape clause by setting limits *“except as Council may otherwise ordain from time to time.”*

Does that mean Council could change the terms limits – or maybe even eliminate them – without having to go back to the voters?

Yes, that’s what it means.

Are there any term limits now?

City Council members are elected every four years, but there is no limit on the number of times they can run for reelection. President Anna Verna, now in her 9th consecutive term, is Council’s longest serving current member. Bill Green, Maria Quiñones-Sánchez and Curtis Jones are in their first term. The next election is in 2011.



Would term limits bring about better government?

No one really knows. But there are several advantages to term limits:

- More people would be attracted to public service.
- New Council members bring in fresh ideas.
- Members in their third and final term could be emboldened to spend their political capital on more innovative legislation and to “buck” the status quo.
- It’s a painless way to ease out Council members who really aren’t producing much.

Wouldn’t we would also lose strong Council members?

There are downsides to term limits:

- The deep experience and expertise of some public officials that come with long-term service would be lost.
- The public is denied the right to choose who they want in office and for how long.
- Members in their third and final term may decide to “hang it up” since they can’t be reelected anyhow.

Remind me how many people are on City Council.

There are 17 people who serve on City Council. This include 10 District Council members who are elected by and represent voters within specific geographic areas and 7 “At-Large” Council members who are elected by voters all across the city and represent the whole city.

Does Councilman Goode’s Resolution apply to all of the current 17 Council members?

Although it’s short, the language in the Resolution is a little murky.

It says that “a councilman who was elected to a four-year term in 2011 shall not be eligible for more than one succeeding four-year term.” Let’s say Councilman Goode is reelected in 2011 to his fourth consecutive term. His Resolution seems to permit him to run for a fifth consecutive term in 2015.



So only the three Council members in their first term could end up serving only three consecutive terms?

It seems that way. Bill Green, Maria Quiñones-Sánchez and Curtis Jones won their seats in 2007. According to Councilman Goode's Resolution, they can run in 2011 and again in 2015. But they cannot run in 2019.

So the entire Council could turn over all at one time?

It could happen, but probably won't since it is unlikely that every current member of Council will run again in 2015. Some will retire. Some will resign. Some may get defeated in 2011. Some may not even run in 2011.

What about someone elected for the first time in 2011?

The Resolution is unclear. An individual elected to Council in 2011 should be able to serve three consecutive terms (that is, he or she should be able to run for election in 2011, 2015 and 2019). But a literal reading of the Resolution seems to say that this individual elected in 2011 can only run for one more consecutive four-year term.

Is term limits for Council members a new idea?

Not at all. Term limits is an issue that comes up for all elected officials from time to time. In 2007, when all City Council members were last elected, they were asked to respond to a list of principles put together by a group of individuals and organizations interested in changing government. The first principle of "The R.E.F.O.R.M. Agenda," listed under the category "Restore Credibility" was: "The City will amend the Philadelphia Home Rule Charter to limit the terms of City Councilpersons to no more than three consecutive terms."

Did any current Council members endorse The R.E.F.O.R.M. Agenda's proposal for a three-consecutive term limit?

Three: Council members W. Wilson Goode, Jr., Bill Green and Jack Kelly.



Did any current Council members reject it?

Five: Council members Frank DiCicco, Curtis Jones, Darrell Clarke, Blondell Reynolds Brown and Frank Rizzo.

What about the others?

Council members Anna Verna, Jannie Blackwell, Joan Krajewski, Donna Reed Miller, Marian Tasco, Brian O’Neill, Bill Greenlee and James Kenney never responded to the list of principles. Council member Maria Quiñones-Sánchez said: “I am generally in favor of term limits however term limits in New York City have created a great deal of instability. I therefore favor studying the issue to make sure we don’t make similar mistakes.”

Do we know what Mayor Nutter thinks about term limits?

When The R.E.F.O.R.M. Agenda was also circulated to then-candidate Michael Nutter in 2007, he did not endorse term limits for his former Council colleagues.

But doesn’t he have a term limit?

Yes, he does. In May 1951, Philadelphia’s voters approved a new Home Rule Charter that limits the Mayor of Philadelphia to two consecutive four-year terms.

Maybe the Mayor will be inspired by Councilman Goode to change his term too?

Don’t count on it. Mayor Frank Rizzo tried to do that when he wanted to run for a third term as mayor in 1979. The city’s voters shot down a proposed ballot question to do this in November 1978 by a 2-1 vote.

Didn’t something recently happen in New York City involving term limits?

You’re thinking about Mayor Michael Bloomberg winning a third consecutive term in November 2009. In 2008, he signed a bill extending his term – and also the terms of New York City’s 51 Council members and other citywide elected officials (except for district attorneys) – from two to three consecutive terms.



What about Councils in other cities?

Los Angeles had a two four-year term limit for its 15 City Council members until a 2006 ballot question (Proposition R) changed it to three four-year terms.

Houston's 14 Council members are elected every two years, and can serve no more than three consecutive terms.

Detroit's 9 City Council members, who serve four-year terms, have no term limits.

Chicago's 50 Alderman (as members of that city's legislative body are called) serve for four years and have no term limits.

What about other cities in Pennsylvania?

City Councils in Pittsburgh, Scranton and Allentown have no term limits. Erie's City Council members are limited to three consecutive four-year terms.

What happens to Councilman Goode's Resolution next?

Once a bill is introduced, the Council President Anna Verna refers it to one of Council's standing committees. At the time this Q&A was written, Councilman Goode's bill hadn't been assigned yet.

What happens after the Resolution goes to a Committee?

The Committee Chair can decide to do nothing with the bill. Or the Chair can schedule a hearing so that any member of the public can have an opportunity to testify for or against it. Council is obligated to advertise when the public hearing will be held.

When will I get to vote on it?

An amendment to the City Charter that is proposed by a Resolution of City Council must be approved by 2/3 of Council's members before it goes on the ballot for voter approval. But this Resolution faces a long road before getting to that point.