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Contact: Zachary Stalberg
President and CEO
(215) 557-3600, ext. 106
(267) 241-1628 (cell)

SEVENTY URGES COUNCIL TO FREEZE BUDGET FOR
CLERK OF QUARTER SESSIONS' OFFICE
Empty office should be permanently abolished

PHILADELPHIA – April 15, 2010 – Zack Stalberg, President and CEO of the non-partisan Committee of Seventy, urged City Council to halt funding for the operations of the Clerk of Quarter Sessions until it is absolutely clear that all potential savings have been identified and there is a credible plan in place for improving the services that are supposed to be handled by the Clerk's staff.

Council will consider the CQS' proposed \$5 million budget at 10 a.m. next Tuesday, April 20.

Independently-elected Clerk of Quarter Sessions Vivian Miller quit her office at the end of March as a result of pressure from the Committee of Seventy, the Philadelphia Intergovernmental Cooperation Authority and an investigative report by *The Philadelphia Inquirer*. The Supreme Court of Pennsylvania transferred the duties and functions of the CQS to the First Judicial District.

"The tasks assigned to the CQS were transferred to the court system," Stalberg said. "But it is not at all clear that all the jobs must be preserved at the taxpayers' expense."

There are other questions, too.

- Mayor Nutter and City Council have refused to say whether they are willing to permanently abolish the \$112,000-a-year job of Clerk of Quarter Sessions. If the job is not abolished now, candidates will start to compete for the post, which would be on next year's ballot.
- Miller's chief deputy, her daughter Robin Miller, appears to be campaigning to thwart reform efforts, keep the CQS' position alive and increase funding for the office.

- While all but a few of the 110 CQS employees who were transferred to the court system are covered by civil service, a behind-the-scenes wrestling match goes on over whether they should continue to be civil service employees and selected on merit. Many court employees, who are not covered by civil service, are selected on a “who you know” basis, Stalberg said.

The Committee of Seventy’s view is that every cost in the city’s budget for the 2011 fiscal year should be scrutinized before taxes, fees and fines are increased. “The Clerk of Quarter Sessions’ budget might not be huge compared to other costs in the budget,” Stalberg said, “but it is a perfect example of how City Hall should use every opportunity to streamline, professionalize and reduce costs. That’s what’s happening in the real world.”

Though Mayor Nutter announced Miller’s departure, he has refused to respond directly to repeated questions about whether the office should be formally abolished. Miller continues to serve as a Democratic ward leader. Fourteen of the 17 members of Council and the mayor are Democrats.

The Committee of Seventy recommended eliminating the obscure CQS’ office and transferring its necessary functions to the courts, in its March 2009 report, “*NEEDLESS JOBS: Why Six Elected City Positions Should Die.*”

The office can be abolished by Council and the mayor. A change in the City Charter is not required.

The “Needless Jobs” report, which also urged abolishing the independently elected City Commissioners, Sheriff and Register of Wills, is available at http://www.seventy.org/OurViews_Needless_Jobs.aspx.

Pennsylvania Supreme Court Chief Justice Ronald D. Castille has commissioned an independent study to examine moving the Register of Wills and several other local court officials to the state court system.

The court system has commissioned a performance audit of the CQS’ office, but there is already plenty of evidence that the office was failing the public.

Stalberg noted that Court of Common Pleas President Judge Pamela P. Dembe reported finding \$55 million in the CQS office’s bank accounts, including at least \$4 million in interest, which should have been given to the city. “And that was only on day one after the court took over the office,” he observed.

“It’s appalling, especially when you add this to the \$1 billion in bail money that – according to *The Inquirer* -- went uncollected by Miller’s operation,” Stalberg said. “If these people had been doing their jobs, the mayor and Council could be having a completely different conversation about the budget.”

Robin Miller, Vivian Miller’s daughter, retained her \$72,800 job when the office was moved to the court system. She contends that this move was unnecessary.

“Ms. Miller is defending an office that has been an embarrassment for years,” Stalberg said. “To contend that the CQS’ office could have done a better job if it only had more resources is absurd. The office failed to do its job and doesn’t deserve a second chance.”

“It’s up to Council to demonstrate its leadership by doing away with the Clerk of Quarter Session’s office before anyone else starts jockeying for the seat in 2011,” Stalberg concluded. “Council and the mayor should show the same urgency for abolishing the CQS as they have with the Board of Revision of Taxes.”

The Committee of Seventy is a non-partisan organization fighting for clean and effective government, fair elections and informed citizens in Philadelphia and throughout the region. For more information, log onto www.seventy.org.

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