



WILTON MANORS HISTORICAL SOCIETY

Historical Notes

March 2009

THE MAYOR, THE COMMISSION, AND THE CITY ADMINISTRATOR

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Wilton Manors Historical Society

When we attend a City Commission meeting, we take for granted the five member Commission, including the Mayor, flanked by the City Manager and City Attorney. This was not always the case.

Wilton Manors started off in 1947 as a Village, a corporation under the general laws of the State, and, in 1953, became a City. We had a fairly standard, for the time, strong Mayor/Council form of government. There were five members of the Council, including a President, who presided at meetings. Individual Council members were responsible for various aspects of our management, a Police Commissioner, a Roads Commissioner, a Water Commissioner. In addition, there was a Mayor, who did not have a vote on the Council but could veto their decisions. The Council President and Vice-President were elected by the Council. All six were elected to four year terms.

This worked for quite a while. Starting in 1960, J. Frank Starling stepped down as Mayor and became the City's first full time salaried "Administrator." He served in this position until 1981 and was, concurrently, City Clerk from 1960 to 1978. He was replaced as City Administrator by Tracy Stafford, who had served as a Councilman from 1975 to 1981. In 1979, Sam Stevens, a sitting Councilman, was hired to be the building inspector. Some residents questioned part time elected officials hiring themselves as full time salaried employees. The City was becoming much more complex. The population in 1960 was 8,257. By 1980, it had grown to 12,718.

In the early 1980's, there was a lot of political turmoil with charges of "cronyism," unhappiness at a fast growing budget, and anger at a stalled review of the City Charter. The election of 1982 shifted power from the "old guard" to the "new guard," with the election of Bill Turner and Diane Cline. In 1982, the City Council hired the first real professional "city manager," J. Scott Miller.

By the March 1984 election there was finally some movement on a new City Charter. The ballot contained an amendment which would have made the Mayor a voting member of the Council with no veto power. It would have eliminated one of the Council positions to make way for the Mayor. This effectively moved power away from the Mayor and to the Council and City Manager. This amendment was supported by the "New Guard."

The election was sharply contested, with clear and loud lines drawn between the pro- and anti- Charter change proponents. If the Charter change passed, there would be two new Council members. If it failed, the top three vote getters would get seats on the Council. The Question failed. But, to confuse matters, the “New Guard” Mayoral candidate, who favored the change, Robert DuBree, won. To confuse matters even more, he received fewer votes than the “Old Guard” candidate, Sam Stevens, who was ruled ineligible to run at the last minute.

Everyone seemed unhappy with the March results on the Charter amendment. Donn Eisele, former astronaut and former Councilman, who had been defeated for re-election by Diane Cline and Bill Turner in 1982, pushed to put the question on the ballot again in November. Eisele stated that he is “very concerned about the state of affairs in our government.”

Eisele contended, perhaps correctly, that there was too much power in the hands of the Mayor which in the past “has always worked because we’ve had laid back, easy-going mayors.”

Eisele’s Charter Amendment Proposal – listed on the ballot as “Charter Amendment” – put the Mayor on the Council with a vote and no veto. Everyone of the five would serve staggered four year terms and the Mayor and Vice-Mayor would be elected by the Council, making any kind of radical shift in direction slow.

A competing Proposal – listed on the ballot as “The People’s Proposal” – was also put forth. It called for a Mayor elected by the people to a two year term and the balance of the Council elected by the people to staggered four year terms. This would allow for quicker changes in direction. Like Eisele’s Proposal, the Mayor did not have a veto.

Both Proposals invested significant and specific power with the City Manager. This governmental model, generally credited with having been invented by the City of Staunton, Virginia in 1908 to wrest control from an out of control City Council, centralizes control with the City Manager, effectively a Chief Executive Officer.

Bizarrely, both Proposals were put on the ballot, not as “Either/Or,” but “Yes or No” on both. Supervisor of Elections, Jane Carroll had no idea what would happen if both passed.

“A judge would have to settle it. ... First of all, you’re not supposed to put two diametrically opposed proposals on the ballot because you can’t have two forms of government,” she is quoted as saying in the October 4, 1984 *Fort Lauderdale News*.

“The People’s Proposal” was passed 68% to 32%. The other Proposal lost 45% to 55%. It is safe to say at least some of the voters were confused. Wayne Musgrave, who had the fewest votes of the three winners in March, had to give up his seat.

This change to the City Charter happened 25 years ago this year. There have been subsequent changes, but none as significant in terms of the basic form of our government. What will the next 25 years produce?