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## Johnson is convinced Sacramento is ready for a strong mayor

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**Published Saturday, Jul. 04, 2009**

As far as Kevin Johnson is concerned, this town already wants him to be a strong mayor.

Put into office by a 25,000-vote margin in November, Johnson is a celebrity mayor who never seems to stop moving, frustrated by a governing system he complains is mired in process and politics.

Voters rejected that system, he argues, by catapulting him into City Hall, and he aims to make change happen with a revitalized campaign to rewrite the city charter.

After initial push-back from others on the City Council, he put his proposal to make Sacramento a "strong-mayor city" into a vault while the city battled a \$50 million deficit.

With the deficit filled, his proposal to give the mayor increased authority over the budget and the fate of hundreds of city workers likely will define much of what Johnson does in the coming months.

Supporters said last week that they had filed signatures from more than 52,000 city residents in favor of placing the initiative on the ballot. If enough of those signatures are valid, the City Council determines when the vote will occur.

Political observers and even some of Johnson's critics acknowledge he has built the cachet to give the idea momentum, if only because he knows how to monopolize the spotlight.

"He hasn't backed off at all from controversial topics," said Councilman Ray Tretheway, the first council member to oppose the measure publicly. "Has he done enough (to convince voters to pay attention to the proposal)? I think so. I just think it goes too far."

The attention that follows Sacramento's former NBA star-turned-mayor has not dimmed. To some, he is an object of adoration; others seem to abhor him.

Autograph seekers approach him on J Street and in restaurants (his assistant carries a Sharpie pen for those occasions). While at a fundraiser for Republican presidential hopeful Mike Huckabee this week, a dozen iPhones were fixated on the Democratic mayor, recording him as he worked the GOP crowd.

Taking advantage of a national spotlight, Johnson continues to push broad initiatives. An intern in his office is exploring the city strengthening ties with Tel Aviv, Israel – the hometown of Kings draft pick Omri Casspi – and Johnson has five Harvard fellows in City Hall researching economic development, homelessness and the arts.

"I think most people would agree that Johnson has begun to find his political footing," said political analyst Gary Dietrich. "He was a political rookie, we knew that going in, but his confidence level and sure-footedness is beginning to show and that's going to help him a lot in terms of the public perception."

Still, some of his early supporters have been increasingly critical of his moves, particularly the strong-mayor campaign.

## **A question of power**

Council members Sandy Sheedy and Robbie Waters – who supported Johnson's run against two-term incumbent Mayor Heather Fargo – said his proposal gives the mayor too much power.

"I think the city is growing at a rate that we have to consider a strong mayor," Waters said. "But I have a problem with a mayor having the ability to get rid of 500 employees."

Bloggers and columnists who celebrated Johnson's triumph over Fargo have shown signs of cooling toward him, especially during an investigation into his nonprofit St. HOPE's use of federal money.

In May, after agreeing to repay more than \$400,000 in federal grants, Johnson and St. HOPE were removed from the list of those suspended from receiving federal aid. While on that list, Johnson risked the city's ability to accept federal stimulus money, according to the opinion of a Washington, D.C., attorney.

The unease of Johnson's critics continued after a departing St. HOPE executive revealed that a board member allegedly deleted some of Johnson's e-mails while the organization was under federal subpoena, precipitating a new investigation.

The Democratic Party of Sacramento County expressed unease, too. It voted to oppose the strong-mayor measure last month, saying it granted too much power to one person.

"We've had a collaborative form of government for so many years," said Anna Molander, the county party chairwoman. "It doesn't seem to reflect how Sacramentans view themselves and how we want to govern ourselves."

Under Johnson's proposal, the mayor would take on many of the duties now held by an unelected city manager. The mayor would appoint department heads and the city clerk, attorney and treasurer. He would propose the budget, have control over city departments and be able to fire 526 city workers.

In turn, the City Council would become a legislative body with the authority to veto line items in the mayor's budget by a two-thirds vote. The council would confirm mayoral appointments and elect its own president.

If the measure goes before the voters in June 2010 and passes, Johnson likely would remain on the council until a ninth City Council district is formed following the next census. That likely would take until the 2012 elections.

An analysis of the measure by City Attorney Eileen Teichert said it would give the

Sacramento mayor more power than any other California mayor and that it "blurs the lines of authority and accountability." Molander said Teichert's report was "quite persuasive in the argument of how the proposal is not in the best interests of the city."

In response to that analysis, the City Council formed a Charter Review Committee to explore what changes – if any – should be made to the city charter.

Bill Edgar, a former Sacramento city manager and the committee chair, said the group won't begin forming tentative recommendations until August, with a final report to the council due in January.

"The question is, what's good for Sacramento?" Edgar said. "There's no one-size-fits-all kind of a solution, so you have to tailor your recommendations based upon what you see are the issues."

Johnson's supporters disagree with Teichert's findings. They suggest that rewriting a city charter drafted in 1921 is part of Sacramento's natural evolution.

And they counter arguments that the move is a "power grab," saying many of the powers they are proposing to be placed under the mayor already fall to one person – the city manager.

"I'm one of nine votes on the council and beyond that, I'm really a figurehead or ceremonial leader of the city," Johnson said. "But this isn't about Kevin. It's about the city."

"I have a vision for what I think the city can become, but if I can't allocate some resources toward making that vision happen, then it never will."

Dietrich said the proposal might seem like a jump because it follows eight years with Fargo, who was known as "quite a consensus builder."

But city residents don't have to look too far back for a mayor who resembled what Johnson is trying to achieve.

"Joe Serna was no pussycat," Dietrich said of the mayor who held office from 1992 until his death in 1999. "That dude did not mess around."

## **What clout can accomplish**

As the campaign for the strong mayor pushes forward this year, Johnson is expected to talk about how changing the system would help him ensure that K Street is revitalized, the downtown railyard is developed and the Kings get a new arena built.

Speaking in his City Hall office – where a framed photograph of Joe Serna hangs on a wall – Johnson said the troubled Downtown Plaza shopping mall, for example, would benefit from having a mayor challenge its owner, Westfield Corp., to invest in the property.

Even with public encouragement by the mayor on such matters, Johnson said he is hamstrung from directing city staff to take action.

"Do you think the people of Sacramento know that the council and mayor are prohibited expressly from talking to city staff about fixing problems and taking action?" asked Adam Mendelsohn, a friend and political adviser to Johnson. "It's no wonder that we've not been able to do the things that we want to do. The system doesn't allow for it."

As a strong mayor, Johnson said he would push for stricter fiscal controls in the city. He would require a 10 percent rainy-day reserve in the budget, advocate for more funding for

youth programs and public safety, and encourage the state – which does not pay property taxes on properties in the city – to sell buildings to private owners.

"If we're not talking about big ideas, if we don't have the power to execute on that type of vision, then the minutiae and the process starts to win out and not the ideas," Johnson said.

"This is what the community wants, I am thoroughly convinced of that. I hear it every day."

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