

**Portland Needs A Transparency Advocate!**  
**Charter Commission Phase II Proposal**  
**FAQ**

- **What is this proposal?**

This proposal creates a City position of Transparency Advocate, an impartial official who is readily accessible to members of the public including City employees, charged with promoting the rights of persons to know about and participate in their government and supporting high standards of efficiency, accountability and transparency in the provision of City services

- **Why is it needed generally?**

Portlanders value connection and understanding of their government. The City Council acknowledged this in 2020 by adopting a resolution recognizing transparency as a “[core value](#)” of the city; but the city has not taken the steps needed for institutional culture change.

In 2009, Portland embraced a first-in-the-nation “open data” policy, but since then the city has, in the experience of many, moved away from transparency in areas ranging from the posting of accessible information to soliciting public input on important proposed rule changes. Concerns about lack of transparency have been raised by numerous groups, [including ours](#). Examples include:

- News reports have highlighted situations, for example, City officials [have sought to shield communication about police technology](#) from public view.
- A federal judge recently [cited the city’s lack of transparency](#) in proposing an independent monitor be named to oversee reforms of the Portland Police Bureau.
- A recent Oregon Public Broadcasting investigation revealed that Mayor Wheeler and his staff “sent and received [thousands of text messages between 2017 and 2021 that weren’t available to people requesting city records](#).”

Indeed, a 2021 analysis found that in the experience of users of a popular open-government platform, Portland is [the least transparent U.S. city](#). The city’s failure to embrace transparency on many fronts reinforces and deepens existing inequities since only those with specialized knowledge, access or resources can fully participate in Portland government.

- **Why is it needed with our new form of government?**

With Portland’s City Council more than doubling in size, it guarantees steady turnover in officials and staff, meaning an in-house transparency expert would play a crucial role in instilling a culture of openness, sharing best practices with newcomers. In addition, replacing Portland’s “five-mayor” form of executive-branch government with the mayor overseeing a city administrator could mean fewer access points for members of the public to find out needed facts. The Transparency Advocate therefore will be key to helping our new form of government fulfill its promise.

- **Why is it needed in the charter?**

Transparency in government is an overriding value of the people of Portland, and independence of this office is vital to its successful functioning. The explicit value statement added to the Charter, as well as the commitment represented by the Advocate position, could not be removed without a vote of the people.

- **How will this meet the six stated goals of the Charter Commission?**  
 The Commission has listed [six desired outcomes](#) (see p. 3) by which it will evaluate proposals. This proposal supports a majority of those goals: A government that is transparent, accountable and trustworthy, with Councilors who safeguard democracy.
- **How will the proposal fit in with current city policies and practice?**  
 Currently individual bureaus and departments frequently follow different transparency practices. This proposal would promote consistency and provide a central knowledge base for City staff and the general public to turn to for clarity and guidance.
- **How will the proposal fit in with current state law?**  
 Like every local government in Oregon, Portland is charged with following state transparency laws, including public meeting and public record laws. This proposal will increase and enhance Portland's ability to meet the expectations set in state laws.
- **What other governments have this type of position?**  
 In 2017, the Oregon legislature created a state [Office of the Public Records Advocate](#), which does not have jurisdiction over cities including Portland. Cities that have established offices to support transparency include [Atlanta](#) and [Toronto](#). Cities that have adopted transparency as an *actionable* value include [Kirkland, Washington](#) (see Municipal Code, Transparency, Section 3.14.050(5)), [San Francisco](#), and [Madison](#), Wisconsin (see Public Records, Chapter 3E 3.70)
- **How does the proposed structure provide the independence needed?**  
 This proposal places the Transparency Advocate in the City Auditor's office, the office most closely aligned with the mission of the Advocate. Because the Auditor is an independently elected position, this removes the Advocate from the politics of the Council and from city administrator control.
- **How is the work the Transparency Advocate would take on done now in Portland?**  
 Currently, the City Ombudsman has reviewed issues [related to transparency on an inconsistent basis](#). There is no centralized place for the public to connect with the city regarding transparency or records.
- **What will this cost?**  
 This will add one FTE to the City budget. It is worth noting that the Advocate role may include helping mediate disputes over transparency issues, and the cost of the position could be offset by savings from litigation avoided.
- **Where did this idea come from?**  
 A coalition of civic groups, including League of Women Voters of Portland, the Society of Professional Journalists, Open Oregon, and ACLU of Oregon built on an idea originally developed by the City Ombuds' office.