

February 11, 2015

Dear Senator Osten, Representative Miller, and distinguished members of the Planning and Development Committee:

I am writing as a concerned citizen of the State of Connecticut and the City of Bridgeport and in support of HB #5886.

I moved to Connecticut and the City of Bridgeport five years ago from Mt. Vernon, VA. As a former U.S. Comptroller General and a recognized expert on government finance and operational issues, I have discovered that Connecticut and Bridgeport are in very poor financial condition. The leaders of both government entities need to make tough choices to create a better future. In order to do so, the viability and vibrancy of the related governance structures are of critical importance.

With regard to governance practices, I have been shocked and saddened to discover that major conflicts of interest exist in the governance structure of the City of Bridgeport. Specifically, contrary to the current City Charter approved by the voters of Bridgeport, several City Council members, including the President of the City Council, are also city employees. This represents a direct violation of the City Charter and is in conflict with prevailing good government practices in the United States. Importantly, it is also inconsistent with the conflict of interest laws that apply to both state and federal employees.

City employees are not in a position to exercise the independent judgment that is required of a Council member. The City Council is supposed to be an independent and co-equal legislative branch in the city's governance structure. Common sense dictates, it is hard to tell your boss "no" on a matter that he/she deems to be of importance. I have personally seen this conflict occur when I attended a City Council meeting and was told by the current President of the City Council that he could not vote on a budget issue in a manner that Mayor Finch would not be pleased with.

The conflict of interest in connection with city employees serving on the Council is compounded by the fact that the City Attorney's Office represents the Mayor, the City Council, and all City Boards and Commissions. While HB #5886 does not address this conflict, this issue also needs to be addressed in future legislation. Furthermore, legislation is also needed to prevent individuals who are convicted of public corruption from ever holding public office again. Unfortunately, Bridgeport faces the real possibility of having a former Mayor seeking to return to office later this year in violation of this basic principle.

The above governance flaws have resulted in numerous situations that have cost the city, both financially and from a public image perspective. These conflicts have also resulted in the failure of the city to comply with legitimate FOIA requests. One concrete example is the city's payment of several hundred thousand dollars to build a driveway for a non-city resident as part of our airport expansion effort. In this case the Mayor and City Council President served on the Airport Commission and the City Attorney represented the Mayor, Council and the Commission. A more recent example relates to the failure of the city to release the results of tax assessment work that was paid for with taxpayer funds. The reason was clear, releasing the information would have made it clear that the Mayor and the Council have failed on their efforts to grow the tax base faster than the city budget. The result will likely be a large tax increase after the upcoming municipal election in November 2015.

The State of Connecticut provides significant financial subsidies and assistance to the City of Bridgeport and other cities and towns in the state. As a result, all of the citizens of our state should have an interest in this legislation. In addition, this legislation is of major concern to the citizens of Bridgeport. One of our State Senators lost re-election primarily due to his opposition to this type of legislation during the last legislative session. It is also my understanding that a majority of the Bridgeport delegation now supports this legislation.

I urge you to support HB #5886. It will restore home rule and help to prevent serious conflicts of interest in Connecticut. It's time to take steps to fight our state's designation as "Corrupticut". It starts with passing this legislation. The decision is in your hands.

Thank you for the opportunity to comment.

Sincerely,

Dave Waker
37 Beacon Street
Bridgeport, CT 06605
(202) 679-0257 (Mobile)

Sent from my iPhone
Hon. David M. Walker
Former U.S. Comptroller General
Bridgeport, CT