

Holyoke City Council passes Home Rule Petition to recall elected officials

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By **Dennis Hohenberger**

HOLYOKE – The City Council, by a vote of 11-2, passed a Home Rule Petition that would allow the recall of city elected officials. Mayor Alex B. Morse vowed to veto or not act on the petition, rendering the effort moot.

The Charter and Rules Committee invited Morse to its Sept. 24 meeting. The mayor declined and informed the City Council of the following:

“I will not be in attendance. At this time, I will not be signing any charter changes into law, and as the Council knows, no home rule petition moves forward without the approval and consent of the chief executive.”

Past recall petition efforts also failed, left unsigned by Morse, who benefited from a 2017 ballot question that lengthened the term for mayor from two to four years. The mayor’s current term expires in January 2022.

Councilors Mike Sullivan, David Bartley, Howard Greaney, and Linda Vacon, the committee’s chair, filed the latest petition. The Massachusetts Legislator approves all Home Rule petitions, which is not guaranteed.

If enacted, a recall would require 500 signatures of registered voters, with a minimum 35 collected from each of the city’s seven wards.

Vacon said the 35-signature minimum would apply to at-large or long-term elected officials, including the mayor. The requirement would prevent a single ward from holding sway over a recall effort.

The recall question would appear on a November ballot and not in the person’s final term. However, a special election could be

called, according to Vacon. The elected official subject to the recall could not run.

However, the person would maintain their office if the recall vote failed to garner a majority of voters.

Vacon said the recall mechanism provides a check and balance power to voters and holds elected officials accountable, especially with the mayor’s term extended to four years.

“Let’s say in year two, the person is not fulfilling the duties, and there’s still a long time left in the elected term,” she said.

Councilor Joseph McGiverin said he agreed with the amendments, as he suggested increasing the signature requirement from 250 to 500.

“I voted for this in the past, and I’m not for recall for two-year (terms). But, when we look at the four-term that is now for real, it triggers a need for a recall option within government,” McGiverin said. “It’s nothing personal to who our mayor is now, and it’s nothing personal to who’s the mayor in the future.”

While Councilor Rebecca Lisi was “open and favorable” to passage and agreed with the 500-signature amendment, she found the original 25-signature threshold from each ward low compared to the overall 500-signature requirement.

After a brief discussion, the council changed the ward signature threshold from 25 to 35. Lisi offered an amendment to raise the limit to 50.

Lisi opposed including a recall question and candidate names on the same ballot, which could create “division” and “acrimony.” She cast a “no” vote.

Councilor Peter Tallman said whether the mayor signed the petition or not mattered little to him. “As a council, we should stay together and put this forward. For anyone elected four years, the citizens should have a say,” he said.

Sullivan said that if Morse changed his mind and signed the petition, it would not affect the mayor’s current term. The Massachusetts General Court would need to accept the petition, hold hearings and proceed with a final vote, resulting in a long process.

Ward 3 Councilor David Bartley said the mayor has turned down or not appeared at several committee meetings, including Charter and Rules, Development and Government Relations, or Public Safety.

“You got to put your hands on the wheel and start driving the car,” Bartley said. “That’s not happening.”

Bartley made a direct plea to Council President Todd McGee to speak directly with Morse about the no-shows.

McGee said he could not force the mayor or anyone to appear at committee or council meetings. He promised to contact the mayor and Chief of Staff Mike Bloomberg as to the reasons for not showing up at committee or council meetings.

Ward 6 Councilor Juan Anderson-Burgos though he found nothing wrong with the petition, he found the timing suspect. “This first came up was after our now mayor won the first four years,” he said.

Anderson-Burgos said the petition suddenly reappeared after allegations Morse acted inappropriately toward students while an adjunct lecturer at the University of Massachusetts Amherst.

“If this is such a good thing, why is the timing so bad,” Anderson-Burgos said in a scolding tone. “I do believe in this order. To be honest,

I’m going to vote on it, but I just need you (City Council) to know that.”

He labeled his colleagues' past and current behavior as amounting to “childish games.”

McGee disagreed with the Anderson-Burgos' assertions and that the recall petition was an ongoing matter before the Charter and Rules Committee.

Anderson-Burgos, who offered an apology, said, “I want this city doing so much better. I want us to work together. I really do. Sometimes it feels like we’re slamming each other against the wall. I love this city and I know you do, too.”

The same group of councilors filed a resolution in September that condemned Morse’s alleged actions at UMass-Amherst.

The mayor admitted being in several relationships with students while under contract at the university. [UMass-Amherst hired an outside attorney to investigate the allegations](#), which is ongoing.

The resolution drew sharp rebukes from several city councilors, including Libby Hernandez, and the public, who deemed the resolution homophobic and tainted by political and personal motivations.

The resolution was withdrawn, as was an order of censure filed by Hernandez, the Ward 4 representative. Hernandez voted “no” on the Home Rule Petition.

Story source: [Story source, MassLive.com](#)

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