

Baltimore City Council advances bill that would increase authority over city budget following tiff with mayor



Baltimore Sun |

Jun 22, 2020 at 7:42 PM

Bill Henry, the 4th District Baltimore City councilman, has introduced a number of city charter amendments. Monday, City Council gave key approval to a change that would give City Council more control over the budget. (Amy Davis / Baltimore Sun)

The Baltimore City Council advanced a bill Monday which would change the city charter to give Council more authority over the city's budget.

The bill, sponsored by Councilman Bill Henry and all but one of his council colleagues, would place a question on an upcoming ballot asking voters if the council should have the ability to move money in the city's budget.

Currently, Baltimore's charter allows the City Council to cut the city budget proposal, but the body has no authority to then reallocate funding to other items. Only the mayor has that power.

The council voted 12-3 Monday in favor of advancing the proposed amendment. Council members must take one more vote on the proposal for it to head to Mayor Bernard C. "Jack" Young for consideration.

Paid Post

What Is This?



The timing of the vote coincides with a clash between City Council and Young involving the same charter limitation. Last week, the City Council cut \$23 million in spending from Young's proposed budget in hopes of reallocating the money to other areas of the budget, including two city fire companies due for closure under Young's plan.

[But Young stymied the City Council's attempt](#) to negotiate over reallocating the money, signing the budget on June 17 and moving the money cut by council into the city's surplus for fiscal year 2021.

"This is truly an opportunity to restore something like a check and balance on the mayor's budgetary power in a way that most people think we can and are often disappointed to learn we cannot," Henry said ahead of the vote.

Council members Robert Stokes, Danielle McCray and Shannon Sneed voted against the bill. McCray said there has not been enough public testimony on the [various charter amendments](#) council has considered over the last few months. She said she was also concerned about hurting the city's bond rating during a global pandemic.

Councilwoman Mary Pat Clarke, who identified herself as a "charter lover" and believer in the city's system of government, defended the proposal as an effective balance of power. The amendment is long overdue, she said.

"My gosh, everybody," she said "Let's exercise the kind of legislative authority that our constituents already think we have, and we should as their legislator."

Henry had hoped to speed up the passage of the proposed amendment in an effort to meet a state deadline for ballot questions to be placed on the November ballot. Questions must be certified by July 31.

Maryland Policy & Politics Newsletter

Weekdays

Keep up to date with Maryland politics, elections and important decisions made by federal, state and local government officials.

The council may need the additional time because Young has [vetoed several other proposed charter amendments](#) spearheaded by City Council. The board has proposed numerous reforms in the wake of former Mayor Catherine Pugh's resignation and guilty plea.

During Monday's meeting, the council voted to override two mayoral vetoes on charter amendments pertaining to the veto process and to change the timing of a vote to override a veto.

The charter currently requires the mayor to return vetoed legislation with written objections to City Council within three meetings. Five calendar days after that but within 20 calendar days, the council can vote to override the veto.

The council voted to amend Henry's bill Monday to push the implementation of the proposed amendment back to 2022. Acknowledging that the amendment would cause a serious structural change to the city's budget process, Henry said he wanted the council to be involved from the start of budget discussions that year.

If the proposed amendment makes it to the ballot, it won't be the only such question considered by city voters this cycle. A proposed state-level ballot question due to appear on November ballots would give the General Assembly a similar boost in budget authority.

Currently, legislators can cut the budget but can't reallocate that money to other areas. The amendment, if approved, would go into effect for the next governor, so it would not curtail Gov. Larry Hogan's powers.

Emily Opilo is a political reporter for The Baltimore Sun. She previously covered city hall for The Morning Call in Allentown, Pa. for seven years. A central Pennsylvania native, Emily previously wrote for the York Daily Record and The Patriot-News. She holds a master's from Syracuse University and a bachelor's from American University.

Recommended on Baltimore Sun

Latest Politics



Most Read on Baltimore Sun