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Voters spoke on terms limits twice - let 'em speak again, says Queens Civic Congress' Corey Bearak

By Corey Bearak
Guest Columnist

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Let the voters decide term limits, declares the [Queens Civic Congress](#) (QCC), the borough-wide coalition of civic and condo, cooperative, tenant and other community organizations, which last month unanimously adopted a resolution that will be included in its CIVIC 2030 platform.

Unlike the closed-door deliberations that resulted in pending City Council legislation to unilaterally extend the terms of all Council members, the five borough presidents, the public advocate, the controller and the mayor, QCC's resolution followed a summer's worth of discussion in the Queens civic movement.

In August, QCC's executive committee - its members either current or former presidents of neighborhood civics - proposed a position that QCC circulated by regular mail and e-mail and posted on its www.queensciviccongress.org Web site for consideration on Sept. 15.

QCC member civics, in open discussion with media present, unanimously adopted a resolution that, "calls on ALL public officials and those who aspire to public office to commit to the use of referendum to attempt any change in the City Charter enacted in that matter, and state that position publicly."

Why? What makes this so important? The public already voted consistently - two separate times - on this issue. First, voters opted to enact term limits. Second, voters rejected its repeal. As a matter of good public policy and basic democracy, any change in term limits, from its revocation to its extension or its reduction must only be enacted by the same process that led to its 1993 enactment - voter referendum.

Also important, the second time term limits went to a vote in 1996, the City Council, populated by office holders who would have kept their posts by legislative enactment, placed the referendum on the ballot. These Council members clearly recognized the need to "Let the voters decide."

Interestingly, this time around, the term limits discussion at City Hall developed so that the opportunity to place the issue before voters by next month lapsed. The mayor asserts a claim of not enough time to put this issue before the voters. He argues against voter involvement as a "luxury" we cannot afford. Simply not true. Good government remains a necessity, never a luxury.

While the time has expired to place an initiative on this November's ballot, plenty of time remains to place a referendum before the voters in a special election following a [Charter Revision Commission](#) proposed by City Council legislation or by local law.

In his State of the City Address last winter, the mayor committed to appoint a Charter Revision Commission that could have considered term limits and any other possible municipal governance reform. To date, that commitment to appoint a Charter commission remains unfulfilled by City Hall. That process would have easily allowed for a term limits change to be proposed early last month and placed on November's ballot. Putting term limits on next month's ballot would have also coincided with the presidential election, which attracts the largest voter turnout.

Simply put, QCC opposes any plan to change term limits except through a public referendum. If City Hall and the City Council seek to repeal or modify terms limits, anything other than a voter referendum smacks of illegitimacy. Legitimacy and confidence in government depend on politicians recognizing the public will. Any failure to recognize two public referendums would reduce the city government to, in my predecessor's words, a junta.

QCC invites concerned organizations and citizens to join in support of our "Let the Voters Decide" campaign for Democracy in [New York](#). QCC's Web site will list supporters.

Queens Civic Congress also urges New Yorkers to call 311 with this simple and direct message to City Hall - "Let the voters decide term limits."

[Corey Bearak](#), an attorney and public affairs consultant, serves as president of the Queens Civic Congress.