



Committee of Seventy

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**Philadelphia City Council  
Committee on Commerce & Economic Development  
Written Testimony on “Putting People First at City Hall”  
November 26, 2019**

My name is Pat Christmas, Policy Director for the Committee of Seventy, and I appreciate this opportunity to speak to the good-government pillar of the Chamber of Commerce for Greater Philadelphia’s Neighborhood Growth Project: “Putting People First at City Hall.”

With the time available, I would like to raise two general points for us to keep in mind.

First, the City of Philadelphia has made enormous strides forward in government integrity over the past decade and a half. In the wake of a massive scandal in the early 2000’s, the City passed its first campaign contribution limits in 2003, pay-to-play contracting safeguards in 2005 and created an independent Board of Ethics in 2006 to vigorously enforce the rules. This was followed a few years later by new registration and disclosure requirements for lobbyists in 2010 and gift restrictions for City officials in 2014. Philadelphia is, for some of these issues, in the vanguard among major U.S. cities and state governments, including Pennsylvania. Harrisburg remains the wild west, where legislative leaders have been resistant to ban even cash gifts, though this may change soon thanks to relentless citizen activism.

All of this progress does not often get the notice it deserves, which is why I underscore it today. But as you would suspect, my second point is that there remains a great deal of work left to do. There are dozens of substantive good-government issues that warrant time and attention, including those in the Chamber’s Neighborhood Growth Project platform (e.g., establishing a permanent Office of Inspector General or real-time performance dashboard) and in ethics agendas previously distributed by the Committee of Seventy to City Council and mayoral candidates.

For today, I would like to highlight three issues that we believe should be front and center not only for Council, but for civic, community and political leaders across Philadelphia.

- 1) Continue to evaluate, simplify and open up the process for selling publicly-owned land.** The land-use reform recently passed by this City Council has the overarching goal of making land disposition less complicated, more transparent, and more responsive to the public -- unequivocally, a step in the right direction. The elimination of the Vacant



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Property Review Committee, on its own, advanced these objectives and was a widely-lauded feature of the reform bill. But, given the complexities of the legislation and the system it is altering, we believe there will assuredly be further improvements to be made in the future.

- 2) Put city residents at the forefront of the redistricting process.** With historic levels of advocacy across Pennsylvania devoted to ensuring a fair process in the redrawing of state legislative and congressional maps after the 2020 Census, remarkably little has been said about councilmanic redistricting. Whether through a newly enshrined process in the Charter and/or a citywide, citizen-led mapping initiative, thousands of Philadelphians should be brought into the civic project of drawing of our ten Council districts in 2021.
  
- 3) Support nonpartisan municipal elections and ranked-choice voting.** The Committee of Seventy and a growing number of citizens and advocates believe our first-past-the-post elections with closed primaries fall far short in allowing voters to adequately express their preferences. Although the City of Philadelphia has no direct control over its system of elections, strong support from our City officials for nonpartisan elections and ranked-choice voting would send a clear signal to our delegation and lawmakers from other parts of the state that these reforms deserve serious consideration.

The Committee of Seventy was founded in 1904 by business and civic leaders who understood that representative, ethical and effective government are essential to the health and future of Philadelphia. Much has been accomplished, but there remains a distance to go in building a fully vibrant local democracy and trustworthy government. We look forward to working with City Council, the Philadelphia Chamber of Commerce and other Neighborhood Growth Project partners on these important issues in the months ahead.

Thank you.

Pat Christmas, Policy Director  
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