

## **Term Limits – William Smith**

*Should Alameda's elected officials be subject to firm term limits that limit the amount of time they may serve in a given position.*

Alameda began imposing term limits on its Mayor and City Council Members in 1977. Section 2-14 of the City Charter states that no person shall be eligible for the office held by that person for two complete consecutive terms immediately prior to the term for which the person seeks election or appointment. The following year, voters extended this limitation to Alamedans appointed to boards and commissions. Section 2-14 does not apply to the City's Auditor and Treasurer. These positions do not have term limits. It also does not apply to any partial terms of office of a Mayor or Council Member that was appointed or elected to complete.

Approximately 2/3 of Alameda Counties limit the number of consecutive terms that Mayors or Council Members may serve but they permit these officials to run again after a break in service. For example, in the City of Albany, Council Members may serve two consecutive terms and then run again for Council after a two-year break in service. Piedmont allows City Council to serve two consecutive four-year terms than to run again after an eight-year break. Union City which imposes a limit on its Mayor and Council Members or three consecutive terms and allows them to run again after a two-year break. The purpose of term limits there is to encourage qualified candidates to seek office. Some cities count a partial term in office as a single term for purposes of term limits while other cities like Alameda only include full terms in the count.

Generally speaking, term limit proponents argue that firm limits on an elected official's time in office eliminate incumbent advantage and encourage qualified candidates to run. Those advantages listed in the 1991 Supreme California Court decision upholding a ballot initiative to uphold term limits on State legislators to include stronger fundraising capabilities, increased name recognition, more media coverage and more experienced staff. Prior to passage of the law, 92% of incumbent state legislators running in the 1990 general election won reelection and 9 ran unopposed. The decision says that proponents argued that imposing a break in service was not sufficient to erase the advantages that incumbents enjoy. Furthermore, proponents argue that term limits allow elected officials to focus on policy making and to make unpopular but necessary decisions.

Opponents say that term limits curtail voters' right to choose their representatives and automatically push even the most effective policy makers out of office destabilizing government and potentially increasing the power of unelected special interest. A 2006 study by the National Conference of State Legislators as quoted by the Washington Post found they had little impact on the diversity of chambers and increased the importance of nonpartisan staff and lobbyist. For the Post, the study found that new law makers relied on lobbyists for their political expertise although lobbying became more difficult because the relationships were more short lived and term limit lawmakers were more suspicious of lawmakers. An earlier research brief from the Public Policy Institute of California on the impact of Proposition 140, the 1990 ballot initiative that imposed term limits on California lawmakers found the term limits accelerated an already in progress increase in diversity in Sacramento but had negative impacts on policymaking leadership and oversight.

The rationale is that term limits open opportunities for more Alamedans to serve in elected City offices. The pros are that it provides more opportunities for local elective offices and reduces incumbent advantages. The cons are that it infringes on voter choice, reduces continuity in City government and reduces level of experience within elected officials.