



How Philly Works City Commissioners: Under The Microscope(s)

Philadelphia's elections are run by three independently elected City Commissioners. They don't have to listen to the mayor. They don't have to listen to City Council (even though Council does have to approve their budget). They don't even have to listen to each other.

Although accountable to city voters, who elected the current officeholders in November 2011, the City Commissioners typically don't get a lot of attention.

But this changed on November 6 when they were thrust into the spotlight in what Mayor Nutter called the most confusing, uncoordinated election he has seen in his 30 years in the business.

All three Commissioners say they intend to turn things around. Chair Anthony Clark and Vice-Chair Al Schmidt just approved an office restructuring plan. Commissioner Stephanie Singer has her own reform agenda. Mayor Nutter and City Controller Alan Butkovitz are also examining the way local elections are handled. Scrutiny by others could follow.

The City Commissioners have the biggest influence on whether you have a good or bad voting experience. With the integrity of the voting process emerging more and more as a national issue, we will continue to keep you posted on efforts to make your voting experience as good as it can be.

- December 13, 2012

I've heard a few references to "Missing Marge." What's that all about?

Lots of people think of the City Commissioners and Marge Tartaglione in the same breath. But Tartaglione's 36-year tenure as a Commissioner ended when she was defeated in the 2011 Democratic primary by Stephanie Singer, who (along with Al Schmidt on the GOP side) mounted an aggressive campaign to bring greater efficiencies, cost-savings and transparency to the office.

Why was November 6 so different?

That's what all these probes are aimed to figure out. The City Commissioners have already released an in-house report with explanations and recommendations to improve things for future elections. (You can read the report [here](#).)

If the Commissioners don't have to listen, why are outsiders involved?

Fair and clean elections are so important that it's tough, especially for elected officials, to sit on the sidelines. Take Mayor Nutter. It couldn't have been easy for the President of the U.S. Conference of Mayors to characterize the November 6 elections in his own town as "a bit of a three-ring circus."



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So what is the mayor doing about it?

Nutter has appointed a team of top officials in his administration (plus one outsider) to conduct a fact-finding (it's not an investigation, the mayor insisted) to analyze the Commissioners' in-house report and, according to his press release, other "areas of interest that include but are not limited to: accuracy and integrity of voter rolls; voter registration process and system; technological interaction between state and City voter databases; production of the Voter Registration Book; provisional ballot use, supply and delivery; poll worker training; Election Day communication and coordination."

Is this another one of those bi-partisan blue ribbon commissions that will go on forever?

For starters, we bet not one person on the team belongs to the GOP or any minority party. (Mr. Mayor, if you're listening: a few non-Democrats could help the credibility of your fact-finding.) The mayor put their work on the fast track. He wants recommendations in place before the May 21, 2013 primary.

Did the City Commissioners agree to this fact-finding?

Each of them agreed to give Nutter's team their full cooperation. But, as we said earlier, they don't take orders from the mayor so they can take or leave his recommendations.

Moving on to the City Controller. What is he looking into?

He told the City Commissioners he is "commencing an audit of the City of Philadelphia's elections process, including but not limited to provisional balloting." (This refers to the record number of ballots cast by provisional ballot, rather than on the voting machines, on November 6. We talked about this in last week's [HOW PHILLY WORKS](#), which you can find [here](#).)

Is this audit different from the mayor's fact-finding?

We hope so since plowing the same ground would be a waste of the taxpayers' money. Nutter thinks the City Controller should back out altogether. He says it's inappropriate for Butkovitz to audit the office that will oversee his expected reelection bid in 2013. Butkovitz says auditing is his job.

Didn't Butkovitz and Al Schmidt go head-to-head in the 2009 City Controller's race?

They did. It will be up to both Butkovitz and Schmidt to make sure any lingering hard feelings from their campaign don't make their way into the audit. Schmidt – and Clark and Singer, too – say they will cooperate with Butkovitz.

Cooperating and paying attention are two different things.

That's right. The Commissioners don't report to Butkovitz either. And they declined to comment on another audit of their office Butkovitz released on September 24, 2012. The audit, which didn't get much attention since the election was in full swing, cited high overtime expenses, inadequate payroll procedures, unwritten and unenforced personnel rules, missing financial disclosure forms and the continuing absence of required detailed budget submissions, among other things. Of the three current Commissioners, only one – Anthony Clark – was in office during the fiscal years covered by the audit (2008 and 2009).



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Speaking of budget submissions, since City Council has to approve the Commissioners' budget, what are the members saying?

We haven't heard from City Council members about elections recently, but you make a good point: The City Commissioners appear annually before Council during the spring budget hearings. Council will have a chance to ask them tough questions and raise the bar (for the Commissioners and all city departments for that matter) by demanding more detailed information on how they spend public dollars.

You said Schmidt and Clark approved a plan to restructure the office.

At yesterday's public meeting, they approved a revised personnel plan that Schmidt says will make internal operations run more smoothly. We haven't seen any written explanation of what the new job holders will be doing or why the shift was needed. (Messrs. Commissioners, if you're listening: an online org chart of who reports to who would really help.)

Why aren't you mentioning Singer?

It's no secret she is at odds with her two colleagues, who removed her as their chair on November 7. She abstained from voting on the revised personnel plan yesterday (it only takes two votes to pass anyhow) because she said she saw it for the first time the night before the meeting. (That sounded familiar. At last week's Commissioners' meeting, Schmidt and Clark refused to endorse some of her reform ideas because they said they weren't given enough notice.)

Who else is weighing in on city elections?

No one officially that we know of yet (although an informal group of judges, political party lawyers and Commissioners' staffs are sorting out problems that happened on November 6 related to credentialed Minority Inspectors not getting seated on Election Boards at polling places and poll workers not understanding election laws or giving misinformation to voters). But, as a parting gesture before she leaves the PA House, State Representative Babette Josephs has asked the U.S. Attorney and state Attorney General's offices to investigate voting irregularities on November 6. State Representative Daryl Metcalfe, famous this year as the sponsor of Pennsylvania's Voter ID law, says he is compiling information on voting problems in Philadelphia too.

What's the upshot of all this activity?

That depends, in part, on you. As independently elected officials, the City Commissioners answer to the voters. Tell them about your experience at the polls. Make suggestions about what you think needs improvement. You can reach them at: Anthony Clark, 215-686-3462 or Anthony.clark@phila.gov; Al Schmidt, 215-686-3464 or Al.Schmidt@phila.gov or Stephanie Singer, 215-686-3460 or Stephanie.singer@phila.gov. If you don't feel comfortable contacting them, you can talk to us at 215-557-3600 or futureofthecity@seventy.org.

One more thing: Any chance of Marge coming back?

Funny you should mention that. According to PhillyClout, Marge's daughter Renee, who was her mother's deputy until she resigned in late 2010 after the Philadelphia Ethics Board said she violated city rules on partisan political activity, says she is being urged to run against Singer in the 2015



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Democratic primary. And Marge? She'll be 82 then but, after all, anything can happen. It's Philadelphia.

We'll be back to you with more on city elections. If you have something to tell us, please do. We gave you our contact information but here it is again: 215-557-3600 or futureofthecity@seventy.org.