

## **An Open Letter to the Northfield Community**

Northfield is a “special place.” It is one of about 100 “charter cities” in the state that have the right to draft its own local constitution or “charter” setting out the rules of governance. The Northfield City Charter defines our system of governance and outlines the roles and responsibilities of elected and appointed officials. Along with state and federal laws, the Charter guides the content allowable in the ordinances (or laws) found in the Northfield city code. Like the U.S. and the Minnesota constitutions, the Charter is not intended to answer every political question. Governing documents must leave public officials some flexibility in meeting the particular and shifting challenges of governing. But this flexibility has limits; the Charter specifies the general processes and structures of our governance, and these may not be violated. If a particular provision of the Charter impedes the achievement of the public interest, the Charter can be changed.

Recently there have been questions in Northfield regarding the proper roles of the mayor, city council and city administrator. What does the charter say?

- “The form of government established by this charter is the “Mayor-Council” plan. The council shall exercise the legislative power of the city and determine all matters of policy.” (Section 3.1)
- “The mayor shall be the chief executive officer of the city government, accountable to the council for oversight of the administration of the city.” (Section 3.1)
- “The administrator shall supervise all departments of the city. He or she shall have the sole authority to employ and dismiss personnel in city departments, including positions created by ordinance, except for the finance director, the city clerk and other department heads.” (Section 7.3, subd. 3)
- “... The mayor shall study the administration and operations of the city and shall report to the council any neglect, dereliction of duty, or waste on the part of any officer or department of the city.” (Section 3.8, subd. 2)

According to the Charter, the council exercises legislative power and determines all matters of policy, but the mayor has the title of chief executive officer, and is accountable to the council for oversight of the administration of the city. The city administrator is the chief administrative officer of the city and serves under the control and direction of the council. While the roles for the council, mayor and administrator are specified in the charter, reasonable people, including persons in office, might differ on where responsibility lies. The Charter itself cannot settle all the conflicts and confrontations that occur in the governing of Northfield, but it does outline the governance structure and the processes through which conflicts can be negotiated and resolved.

### **Citizen Involvement**

Our City Charter reflects a democratic notion that local citizens can manage their affairs in a way that state statute cannot. For this notion to work, citizens must be informed and involved. Citizens, office holders, and city officials must be aware of the Charter and its role in governing Northfield. The members of the Northfield Charter Commission encourage residents to become familiar with the Charter and with the Northfield City Code, which can be found at the Northfield Public Library and also reached from <http://www.ci.northfield.mn.us/cityhall/boards/chartercommission>. Citizens are also encouraged to take an active and informed role in local government by following the issues, asking questions, and sharing your views with elected and appointed officials.

Sincerely,

#### **Northfield Charter Commission**

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