

# Opinions

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PAGE  
**B5**

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## Charter: Where is county's George Washington?

The U.S. Constitutional Convention in 1787 certainly had as many dissenting factions as the Maricopa County Charter Committee does today. But the framers also had George Washington.

After five months of discussing, then drafting a defensible new structure for local county government, the 15 citizens elected to write the mini-constitution have still not pulled together behind it.

They prefer to bicker.

"We need to put more effort into building consensus," charter member Jack Rose said last week. "If there is any significant organized opposition to these kinds of charter proposals, they usually go down in flames. Someone has to step-up."

Rose isn't promoting himself. "I am not the most popular member of the committee," he said with enviable candor and accuracy.

Andy Kunasek, the surest no vote on the committee, agrees. "Maybe we've all seen too much of each other. I'm very frustrated. I felt so honored to be in on this committee. But I don't think this is a benefit to the county. It makes things worse."

In that harsh assessment, Kunasek, the

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most partisan Republican on the panel, is in the minority.

The committee holds its final public hearing this week and will hold a couple or three work sessions later this month to finalize a proposed charter. It largely accomplishes what it set out to — transferring governing powers from the state Legislature to locally elected leaders. Of the 15 committee members, only four or five will likely oppose the draft, fewer than that if a few hot-button issues can be resolved.

Yet there are enough internal tensions, controversial issues and hostile special interests to sink the proposed charter in a spirited campaign. The proposed charter will likely draw critical fire from the two politi-

cal party organizations, Sheriff Joe Arpaio and several if not all the elected county row officers. They will not, of course, admit their opposition has anything to do with their interest in the status quo, a dysfunctional county government configured in the same way as when it was established 84 years ago. They'll dream up some other excuses.

But that's not the only potential obstacle. This committee even gets into fights with its friends.

Two weeks ago, business lobbyists from the Phoenix and Arizona chambers of commerce, Arizona Public Service Co., the Salt River Project and the Arizona Tax Research Association scheduled a meeting with committee members to discuss some of their concerns about the first draft. Business groups have been generally supportive of the charter notion.

"We have been proponents of reforming county government," confirmed Kevin McCarthy, top staffer at ATRA, a coalition of the state's major corporations and utilities. "We see blatant structural inefficiencies in county government. The current structure doesn't serve taxpayers well."

But the state's business leaders won't embrace just any new charter — or contribute to a campaign to promote its passage. "We are concerned the proposed charter does not enact sufficient reforms and gives the supervisors overly broad ordinance-making powers," McCarthy said.

And that's precisely what McCarthy, SRP's Eric Gorsegner and Phoenix Chamber VP Todd Bankofier told committee members, Chairman Joanna Conde, Vice Chairman Harry Mitchell and Mesa attorney Joe Udall.

The lobbyists insist they held the meeting behind closed doors because they didn't want to embarrass the charter members at a public hearing. "They didn't want to swoop down and bomb them," McCarthy recalled. "There was nothing Machiavellian here," Gorsegner insisted.

But several charter committee members who were not present are incensed at the apparent slight. "It was the height of arrogance," huffed Mary Melcher. "Do they think Joanna Conde and Harry Mitchell run this committee?" sniffed Susan Bitter Smith. "The fact that it was a secret meet-

ing might taint the recommendations." Another panel member compared the session to a "star chamber."

Bankofier, who worked five years in county government as an aide to former Supervisor Jim Bruner, dismisses the criticism. "I followed the proper protocol. I corresponded and worked through the chairman (Conde). We couldn't invite all of them. That would be a violation of the open meetings law," he said.

Kunasek, no admirer of Conde, conceded Bankofier's point, then added: "But Joanna invites only those who agree with her."

Hmmm. If they're sniping so much at each other — and throwing grenades at their potential supporters — how much chance does this charter really stand in a contested election campaign?

"We have to keep our eyes focused on the main issues," a worried Jack Rose concluded. "There is a workable compromise on virtually every issue. But someone has to bring us together."

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