

Eight is enough: Stop the Brevard Charter Review from gutting term limits | Opinion

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March 2, 2022

The Brevard Charter Review Commission is supposed to be a place where citizens offer good ideas for the betterment of our community. Instead, former county commissioner Robin Fisher — who serves on the panel — is using his platform for the betterment of local politicians and the ruling elite.

Fisher has instructed Charter Review to study how Brevard's voter-approved, eight-year term limit for county commissioners might be either weakened or abolished.

From the standpoint of basic legal and political ethics, Fisher's idea is a nightmare. That's because all recommendations from Charter Review need approval from county commissioners. For most issues, this presents no problems. But on the topic of term limits, commissioners have an unacceptable conflict of interest. Even the best public servants cannot objectively balance their constituents' support for eight-year term limits with their own personal incentives to stay in power.

Fisher's proposal would leave foxes in charge of the henhouse. If ethical standards are to be upheld, both Charter Review and the County Commission must immediately acknowledge this clash of interests and recuse themselves from further discussion of changing term limits. Attempting to change one's own term limits is something typically found in dictatorships — both Vladimir Putin and Xi Jinping have done it — rather than democratic republics.

In addition to being ethically suspect, Fisher's anti-term limit proposal is unsound public policy. It would replace our term-limited county commission with a ruling class of permanent career politicians. Under our current term limits law, which was approved by 77% of Brevard voters, commission seats are guaranteed to open up every eight years, providing for a regular refreshment of new faces and ideas. This provides a check against the power of incumbency, while severing the ties that members build with lobbyists and special interests.

As Gov. Ron DeSantis, a term limits supporter, has said, “No elected office, whether federal or local, is ever better off when run by career politicians.”

DeSantis has been proven right. In 2019, Florida State University professor of economics Randall Holcombe published research showing that eight-year term limits have helped slim down big government in Florida, resulting in less spending, lower taxes and a leaner state workforce.

In the era of eight-year term limits, Florida has been rated the most fiscally healthy state in America by George Mason University. We've also been named the most free state in the country by the Cato Institute. In other words, eight-year term limits have produced a renaissance of freedom and citizen-led government in Florida. Former Commissioner Fisher must explain to the public why he takes issue with that.

Fortunately, the 15 citizens who serve on Charter Review need not use their imaginations to ponder what former commissioner Fisher's ideal world without term limits (or with feckless 12-year term limits) might look like. That world already exists in places like Chicago, New York state, Connecticut, New Jersey and Washington, D.C.

What do these term-limit-free zones have in common? They are fiscal dumpster fires. Their budgets are drowning in red ink. Corruption is rampant. Their bond ratings have been downgraded. Most politicians in these places have abandoned their constituents and focus only on keeping power. Is this what Robin Fisher wants to bring to Brevard County?

Removing eight-year term limits would place our county wildly out of step with the rest of Florida. The governor, attorney general, agriculture commissioner, state house, state senate and a majority of charter county commissions here all have eight-year term limits. If eight is great for these offices, there is no good reason why Brevard commissioners need more time.

Thankfully, several local leaders are already stepping up to safeguard term limits. County Commissioner Bryan Lober signed a pledge to protect the voter-approved eight-year term limits. Commissioner John Tobia also confirmed he believes eight is enough. And former Clerk of Court Scott Ellis — the intellectual godfather of the local conservative movement — has thrown his support behind keeping eight-year limits in place.

"I'm all for the limits," Ellis says. "Anyone can go sit out a hitch and come back if they can't live without their title."

When it comes to term limits, Ellis gets it. So do most Brevard residents. Now we've got to make sure the Charter Review Commission listens to us.