

Jane Lansky
Professor Lavery
US City and Metro Politics 204
4 May 2021

Minneapolis' Response to a Global Pandemic: Public Health Decisions and Government Challenges

Mechanics of the City Government

The city of Minneapolis operates under a weak-mayor system. This means that the mayor, who is currently Jacob Frey, has very little executive or judicial power. Most power is granted to the Minneapolis City Council, which contains thirteen members and has various legislative, financial, developmental, and representational responsibilities and privileges. These include but are not limited to: making city laws, managing financial affairs including land use applications, and providing a voice on topics of interest for the communities they represent. The Minneapolis City Council is a ward-based system, meaning that each city council member is elected within their ward and represents that specific area.

The Minneapolis City Council gives citizens the benefit of having an individual representative focusing on their issues, however there are many drawbacks to this format of power division. In an article published by the *StarTribune*, Liz Navratil discusses a proposal that would restrict the power of the Minneapolis City Council. Barry Clegg, head of the committee that maintains the city's constitution known as the Minneapolis Charter Commission, argues against Minneapolis' current division of powers because, in his opinion, there are too many people in charge of the city's affairs. Clegg states that while the city has functioned for quite some time with this system, occasional conflicts between council members have caused issues in the past. But issues have been especially prevalent this year, as the COVID-19 pandemic has

turned the world on its head and continued issues of systemic racism and police violence have caused citywide outrage. If commissioners decide on and finalize a proposal, Minneapolis citizens would be able to vote on changes that would result in the mayor being granted slightly more power over what the city council can do. Commissioners believe that this would lead to less conflict that could be harmful when deciding on city initiatives.

Power and Process in the COVID-19 Era

On March 16th of 2020, Mayor Jacob Frey declared a local public health emergency for the City of Minneapolis. According to the Minneapolis government website, declaring a local emergency gives the mayor the power to “issue emergency regulations.” The earliest regulation, closing bars and restaurants, happened right away on the 16th but over time many others followed. The most recent declaration was on February 19th of 2021 and it stated that emergency responders will be required to use their earned COVID-19 leave by the end of 2023.

While declaring a local public health emergency gave the mayor a considerable amount of control over regulations, the Minneapolis City Council has also played an important role in stopping the spread of COVID-19. The city’s Public Health and Safety Committee consists of six city council members and meets every other Thursday. The objective of the Public Health and Safety Committee is to discuss issues pertaining to the safety and wellbeing of Minneapolis citizens, handle grants received by the Minnesota Department of Health, and pass ordinances relating to COVID-19 initiatives and law enforcement issues. The meetings in which the committee discusses the most recent developments on the COVID-19 situation in the city are recorded and are available for citizens to watch on the city government’s Youtube channel. This creates an element of trust between the council and the citizens, as it enables them to stay informed on all of the details relating to preventing the spread of COVID-19 and managing city

affairs during difficult times. Minneapolis' Public Health and Safety Committee not only works to keep citizens safe, but to keep them informed as well.

Results and Responses

Though the city government now has a plan of action in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, the question of who decides on public health initiatives is still a prevalent topic of discussion. The mayor has been granted the power to issue emergency regulations, but the Minneapolis City Council remains mostly in control of specific pandemic response initiatives. The Public Health and Safety Committee, made up of city council members, deals with updates relating to the pandemic. The mayor does not have authority over any grants provided by the Minnesota Department of Health, that responsibility also falls on the city council. When there are so many leaders, there are times where it's hard to tell who is in charge. For example, when Mayor Frey issued emergency regulations due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the Charter Commission stated that it was difficult to identify exactly who was in control over the pandemic situation between the mayor and the city council. Though this did not cause any catastrophic problems, it did give the citizens the impression that the city government was crumbling. This caused people to have less faith in the mayor and the city council's COVID-19 response plans. Because of this, some members of the Minneapolis Charter Commission believe that Minneapolis should transition to a strong-mayor system like that of St. Paul. This would mean that the mayor would have the main executive power and would have veto power over city council legislation. Essentially, the mayor would have more authority over the city council, thereby lessening any issues caused by disagreement and tension among council members. Giving the mayor more authority over the city council, commission members believe, would

reduce conflicts about how to properly handle the pandemic situation among the 13 council members.

Takeaways

Minneapolis has functioned under a weak-mayor system for a very long time, but conflicts between city council members over how to handle the COVID-19 situation have revealed many weak spots in the system. As concerned Minneapolis citizen Heather Magnuson stated at a public hearing, “there are too many cooks in the kitchen.” With thirteen councilors and the mayor all having varying degrees of authority over the public health situation, there are bound to be disagreements which could lead to a halt in action at the expense of the public.

Some Minneapolis Charter Commission members suggest that the only way to move forward is to shift to a strong-mayor system. Mayor Jacob Frey wishes to wait until a formal proposal is created before speaking publicly about this shift. Overall, many things are up in the air. As Minneapolis tries to navigate a public health crisis, the local government also faces the obstacle of navigating how to manage internal conflicts, such as confusion over who exactly is in charge of handling emergency ordinances, that could prevent rapid and necessary action in slowing the spread of COVID-19 within the city. In a weak-mayor system, the city council has the main authority in passing public health initiatives, but the mayor has the power to issue emergency regulations and essentially override some of the control of the council in times of necessity. The confusion that this has created within the city government has made it clear that serious reform needs to happen or the system could fall apart.

Sources

“Cities 101 - Mayoral Powers.” *National League of Cities*, 13 Dec. 2016,

www.nlc.org/resource/cities-101-mayoral-powers/.

Legislative Information Management System - City of Minneapolis, 2021,

lims.minneapolismn.gov/v2/.

Navratil, Liz. *After Difficult Year, Minneapolis Charter Commission Weighs Overhaul of City*

Government. 20 Dec. 2020,

www.startribune.com/after-difficult-year-commission-considering-changes-to-minneapolis-government/573439001/?refresh=true.

Navratil, Liz. “Charter Panel Seeks to Remedy '14-Boss Problem' in Minneapolis.” *Star Tribune*,

Star Tribune, 24 Mar. 2021,

www.startribune.com/minneapolis-government-suffering-under-14-boss-problem-commission-chair-says/600038116/?refresh=true.

“Official Notices.” *City of Minneapolis*, 16 Mar. 2020,

www.minneapolismn.gov/government/mayor/official-notices/.