TO THE FORUM:

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Last year El Paso adopted a city manager form of government based on concerns about efficiency, accountability, and stability (the terms of mayor and councilmembers were also extended from two to four years).

What is notable about the change is that it was spearheaded by a former business executive who was elected mayor on a platform designed to reduce his own importance. The new structure relieved the mayor of administrative responsibilities and left him with ceremonial, public relations, and similar duties appropriate to the role of government figurehead.

By designating his administrative assistant as day-to-day manager of the administration Mayor Baptiste has tacitly acknowledged that Kaua'i County needs to follow El Paso's example. However, giving this makeshift arrangement a solid foundation will require, as it did in El Paso's case, major changes in the charter.

Under the present charter the mayor is executive head and supervisor of the administration and he cannot transfer his authority and accountability to the assistant. Conversely, the assistant, even if fully qualified, is not free to execute independent decisions based on his professional judgment.

In short, there is no way under the present charter for the assistant to function as county manager. The charter is very careful about making authority commensurate with responsibility. But under current practice the mayor retains authority, the assistant has the responsibility, and accountability is hard to pin down.

To implement a county manager form of administration will require major structural changes in the charter. The Charter Commission (commonly referred to as the Charter Review Commission) is the agency responsible for evaluating and proposing such changes. The commission will soon begin meeting. In my opinion, the public will influence the scope and quality of its work by its input or lack of input.

Previous commissions proposed numerous charter revisions (including in one case a whole revised charter), but none of them suggested structural changes in the government. When you add together the earlier proposals and the structural changes required to install a county manager, you are talking about a new charter.

The 1984 commission noted that without the aid of the media, "our efforts to communicate would be but a whisper in the wilderness of apathy." Is the public still a wilderness of apathy or will we encourage, support, and demand a new charter to serve the public interest in the 21st century?

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