

St. Paul Charter Commission votes down new fines

By Frederick Melo

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By the closest of votes, the St. Paul Charter Commission voted against a proposal that would open the door to new administrative fines for those who break city ordinances.

The 7-6 vote represents a setback for both St. Paul Mayor Melvin Carter's administration and most members of the city council, who for years have called for new strategies against errant landlords, employers who flaunt minimum wage rules, property owners who commit zoning infractions

and other scofflaws.

Officials with the Department of Safety and Inspections and the city attorney's office have said many city ordinances go unenforced because the infraction isn't worth opening a criminal case. Administrative fines, they said, could encourage compliance with-

out going on an individual's criminal record.

"Having a different enforcement mechanism is a positive thing," said Brian Alton, chair of the charter commission.

Critics, however, worried that

CITATION ORDINANCE, 10A

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› Citation ordinance

amending the charter to give the city council the power to create new administrative fines would allow cash-strapped city departments to balance their books at the expense of low-income residents.

They also questioned whether hiring multiple attorneys and a hearing officer was worth the expense.

“If you have 120 dog complaints, is that worth raising fines, putting in three attor-

neys and independent referees?” said Commissioner Gary Unger, after casting a “no” vote.

Council Member Jane Prince on Friday sent the charter commission an email raising 13 questions, including whether the Department of Safety and Inspections would seek the authority to impose “fines for common and minor code violations” such as peeling paint.

“Other than the dubious claim that the amendment is intended to decriminalize code violations — rarely imposed by DSI, and even less frequently upheld by Ramsey County courts — why are we amending the

charter for only \$1,000 in additional fine authority?” Prince wrote.

Former City Council Member Debbie Montgomery, another “no” vote, said the council could still bring its proposal to citywide vote in a ballot initiative or seek the same authority to impose administrative fines from the Legislature. Otherwise, after some fine-tuning addressing critics’ questions, she said, “the city council can come back (to us) with another request.”

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