

Eliminate row offices, report urges

By Marcia Gelbart

INQUIRER STAFF WRITER

Renee Tartaglione, the Number 2 official at the City Commissioners' Office, calls her boss, the commissioners' chairwoman, "Mom." Robin T. Jones, the second-in-command at the clerk of quarter sessions office, calls her boss, Vivian Miller, the same thing.

The mother-daughter teams highlight the culture of nepotism that flourishes in City Hall, said a government-watchdog group that cited both relationships yesterday as part of a new push to eliminate those two elected offices — as well as the register of wills and the sheriff.

In a 56-page report, the non-profit Committee of Seventy said the clock on all four offices and the six elected officials who run them had simply run out.

"Nobody has thought about them in a serious way for a long time," said Zachary Stalberg, the committee's president, noting the four offices date to at least 1951. "But even something so built into the government's structure can be changed if it's not working or doesn't make sense anymore."

Although abolishing the offices, which employ a combined 521 workers, would save the city about \$36 million a year — a tiny percentage of Philadelphia's \$4 billion annual budget — that's not what's driving the effort, Stalberg said. Rather, it's about rebuilding City Hall for the 21st century.

"The reality of government is nothing changes without a crisis," Stalberg said. So as City Council tomorrow hears Mayor Nutter's proposals for closing a five-year, \$1 billion budget shortfall, he said, "We are trying to send the message that government can be remade. You don't just have to tax or cut."

Nutter raised his own questions about the future of the so-called row offices — a de facto arm of the Democratic City Committee since they employ many ward leaders and committeemen — during a neighborhood budget forum in December.

But yesterday he was not yet ready to embrace a call for their elimination. "It's one component of my focus on restructuring government," he added.

Nutter said, though, that related internal discussions were underway, led by Managing Director Camille Barnett and City Solicitor Shelley Smith.

In addition, the mayor also said he met last week with Miller, the clerk of quarter sessions, at her request as she defended her office's

work. The clerk's office, whose duties include receiving bail money imposed by judges and collecting court fines, has been criticized in recent months for sloppiness and poor financial practices.

Nutter said he was uncertain when he would offer his own recommendations on the row offices.

The four offices are run by six elected officials; three of them are city commissioners, who oversee the city voting and election matters.

Just three — Register of Wills Ronald Donatucci, City Commissioner Margaret Tartaglione, and Sheriff John Green — returned calls yesterday. Only Donatucci commented.

The report, titled "Needless Jobs: Why Six Elected City Positions Should Die," provided snapshots of each elected office, including their histories, their responsibilities, and a comparison of how similar functions are carried out in about 10 other cities, among them Phoenix, Los Angeles, Boston, and Baltimore.

It also highlighted the experience of Allegheny County, where voters in 2005 agreed to abolish six elected offices, transforming them into appointed posts. The result: a savings of more than \$1 million a year and less bureaucracy as many office functions were combined.

The Committee of Seventy's proposals differ in that they suggest doing away with some offices altogether.

While most of the changes would require City Council to seek the approval of voters in a referendum, one notably would not: The elimination of the clerk of quarter sessions.

Leading that charge is Common Pleas Court President Judge Pamela Pryor Dembe, who said the clerk's office had not paid \$17 million to people owed bail refunds and also had not distributed more than \$1.4 million in court

fines and other payments to crime victims. "They have consistently shown they don't have either personnel or expertise to manage the money," Dembe said yesterday, calling the office "a disaster waiting to happen."

Dembe said the functions of the clerk's office should be absorbed by the courts. She said the state Supreme Court had the authority to issue an order putting the office under court supervision. In contrast, the Committee of Seventy said Council would need to approve any such change.

In pressing for change, the committee also cited nepotism in the office, noting the \$72,800-a-year job of Miller's daughter. "There are few practices as disillusioning to the public as when an elected official gives the most important job in the office to a close family member," the report said.

Another office, the register of wills, which issues marriage licenses and maintains records related to wills and estates, was recommended to be axed if only to stamp out patronage; none of the 68 employees are civil-service workers.

While acknowledging the "high marks" given to Donatucci's office by auditors, residents, and lawyers, the report said eliminating the elected office would "remove the appearance of cronyism that deepens the public's mistrust of government." It suggested transferring the register's duties to Orphans Court.

"It's very frustrating because *patronage* is a sexy word, like a code word," Donatucci said. "But all these patronage employees must be doing something right, because there's no backlog here. We're never late in any filings, and every year we show a profit."

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