

Town Hall's message: Dump term limits

by Richard Tackett

Published: February 11th, 2011



(From left) Steven Betts, former president and CEO of SunCor Development; Bob Burns, former Senate president; and Tara Jackson, president of the Arizona Town Hall, spoke in support of ending term limits during a Feb. 9 meeting in the Executive Tower lobby. (Photo by Richard Tackett/Arizona Capitol Times)

When the leader of a civic-improvement think tank declared that term limits drain much of the effectiveness from the Arizona Legislature, she was speaking to an audience that welcomed her opinion.

Along with other community leaders, state representatives and state senators — the targets of term limits — gathered on Feb. 9 in the Executive Tower to review recommendations of the 97th Arizona Town Hall, with the most prominent a new push to abolish term limits for legislators.

Tara Jackson, president of Arizona Town Hall, said that abolishing term limits is crucial for effective leadership and increasing civility among lawmakers.

"You're in there for the long haul," Jackson said. "So you have an incentive to think long term and to work across the aisle to get things done for the long term of the state. If you think you're only

going to be there for another year, you're just thinking short term, and you don't care as much about building and keeping relationships."

Former Senate President Bob Burns, an Arizona Town Hall participant himself, agreed that rapport among legislators will improve if term limits are abolished. But, he said, the most important thing to gain from abolishing term limits is the experience of veteran lawmakers who are experts on legislative process.

"With the term limits, you don't have that long-term institutional memory," Burns said. "If the executive branch puts together a long-term plan, they have to implement it. If there isn't somebody championing it in the Legislature, then it'll just die. Everyone comes in with their own issue they want to work on, and so to get them into a long-term planning process is very difficult."

But what about the loophole that allows lawmakers to switch between the House and the Senate, or vice versa, when their terms run out?

"You don't get to chair the same committee, or maybe you don't even get a committee when you're a freshman," Burns said. "So, you sort of lose those contacts you had that provided you the information you had when you were chairman. In my opinion there's a significant loss there with this flip-flop back and forth, which didn't happen before when we had a person chair one committee for years and years."

Philip Blumel, president of U.S. Term Limits, national advocacy group, couldn't disagree more with Burns' argument. U.S. Term Limits in 1992 pushed Arizona voters to pass term limits.

"The idea of term limits is to have the Legislature more geared toward the citizenry, not a professional class of politicians," Blumel said. "It would professionalize the Legislature to have an entrenched incumbency, and that's not what the voters want or deserve. In Arizona, you have regular competitive elections and rotations in office as our founders intended."

Furthermore, Blumel said, there's no way Arizona voters will accept a repeal of term limits. National polling today, he said, shows that voters love term limits more than ever.

Sen. John McComish, R-Ahwatukee, attended the meeting and said the problem of entrenched incumbency that Blumel describes still isn't big enough to warrant term limits.

"I think what term limits fix is this very small problem of people who stay way beyond their welcome and keep getting re-elected," McComish said. "That's a very small problem. Term limits fix that and create a whole bunch of other problems."

There's no immediate plan to begin implementing the Arizona Town Hall's recommendations, but organizers urged legislators to seriously consider the proposal and not to shelve it as the session moves forward.

Arizona Town hall

- The Arizona Town Hall is an independent think tank that meets twice a year to discuss and recommend solutions for various issues facing the state. Arizonans may join by paying annual membership dues of \$100.
- Past recommendations have helped establish the Department of Revenue, the Department of Environmental Quality and other groups that remain prominent in Arizona to this day.
- The 97th meeting was held at the Grand Canyon last in November. The group's recommendations ran the gamut, with topics including abolishing term limits, raising the state's debt limit, ending unfunded mandates and legislative budget sweeps, creating a lieutenant governor position and raising legislative salaries.

Complete URL: <http://azcapitoltimes.com/news/2011/02/11/town-hall%e2%80%99s-message-dump-term-limits/>