

by Mount Vernon resident Tamala Boyd, former Chair of the 2024-2025 MV Charter Revision Commission

If irony were electricity, Mount Vernon could power itself for years.

The reconstituted 2024–2025 Charter Review Commission, now chaired by Hailey Pilgrim, is preparing to release a “Summary Letter” touting transparency, inclusion, and good governance. There’s just one problem: the letter itself is the opposite of all three.

It’s a draft written in secrecy, produced by a body that has operated almost entirely out of public view. Pilgrim’s commission chose not to stream multiple meetings, supposedly because those sessions lacked a quorum. Yet somehow, despite being unable to officially conduct business, the group managed to deliberate, coordinate, and draft a public statement.

That’s right: the same commission preaching accountability appeared to conduct official business without the authority to do so. The hypocrisy would be comic if it weren’t so corrosive to public trust.

When the original Charter Commission failed to adopt its final report, the then-chair closed the process—thanking members for their service and declaring the commission’s work complete. By law and by logic, its business was finished.

Weeks later, Commissioner Hailey Pilgrim recalled the commission by email, attempting to restart what had already ended. The original chair resigned, recognizing that this recall had no legitimate basis and could achieve no substantive change.

Since then, the reconstituted group has met several times and, by its own account, has achieved a quorum just twice—most recently at a streamed meeting held last night. Other meetings where members claimed to lack quorum were not streamed at all, depriving the public of any view into what was being discussed. Yet the group somehow found the coordination to produce a collective “Summary Letter,” complete with recommendations and unified language—strong evidence that deliberations occurred off camera and outside public view.

Pilgrim’s commission has streamed exactly two meetings since the irregular recall. At both, Mayor Shawyn Patterson-Howard dominated the discussion—effectively directing what is supposed to be an independent body. In practice, she has been directing it from the start.

The new “shadow” commission also dissolved the Advisory Board without a vote of the full commission and without notifying Advisory Board members. That smaller faction—again without a full-commission vote—met with the mayor and her staff several times to advance proposals favored by City Hall. The result was a complete mayoral takeover of what was meant to be an independent reform body.

Contrast that with the original Charter Commission—the one that actually practiced transparency. That body streamed every meeting, published every document, and encouraged genuine debate. In consultation with the National Civic League, it developed three major reforms for voters to consider:

- Transition to a professional Council-Manager form of government to bring competence and accountability to City Hall. (Approved 8–7 for the ballot.)
- Replace the elected Comptroller with an appointed Commissioner of Finance to end political manipulation of the city’s finances. (Approved 8–7 for the ballot.)
- Elect City Council members by ward rather than at-large to ensure equal representation. (Rejected 8–7.)

These proposals would have given Mount Vernon a real chance at professional, honest governance. Instead, they were deliberately killed.

This wasn’t bureaucratic confusion; it was a coordinated political takedown engineered by the mayor and carried out by her political allies on the city council.

Derrick Thompson turned a City Council “special meeting” into a public execution of the Charter Commission, giving the microphone to political allies to ridicule and attack volunteer commissioners. It was intimidation—an elected official using his platform to protect the status quo.

Danielle Browne, now campaigning for City Court judge, watched it happen and said nothing. She knew it was wrong. She stayed silent anyway.

And then there’s Caitlin Gleason, who is up for reelection in days. During the final stretch, Gleason and her allies pressured one of the eight commissioners who had voted “yes.” They called, texted, and leaned on others to do the same until that member finally flipped. The commissioner later told a reporter about the pressure she faced.

Other commissioners described the same pattern—calls from people they hadn’t heard from in years, emails from strangers sent to their private accounts, and social-media posts questioning where some commissioners grew up, as if being “from here” were the only qualification for caring about Mount Vernon. It was a deliberate effort to “other” commissioners—to paint longtime residents and taxpayers as outsiders unworthy of a voice in their own city. It looked less like civic engagement and more like a coordinated campaign to intimidate and divide.

At the final meeting, Gleason sat in the audience jeering and taunting the commissioners until both the chair and a member of the public asked her to stop. It was a shameful

scene—disgraceful conduct for a sitting council member—and a vivid reminder of why Mount Vernon so badly needs structural change. When elected officials heckle citizen volunteers for doing their civic duty, that's not politics—it's rot.

When the original commission began leaning toward a City Manager system, the mayor recognized the threat: less political control, fewer patronage jobs, more accountability. So she did what entrenched politicians do—she smothered reform through manipulation and delay. She activated her people to block meaningful change. She moved the final meeting to the Council chamber without consulting the chair, ensuring her supporters could fill the seats, shout, and disrupt. Loyalists were encouraged to drone on endlessly while others were jeered and booed. And in the end, she got what she wanted—the Mount Vernon community will not have the opportunity to vote on these reforms next week.

What remains of the Charter Commission is a hollow shell—a body that refused to stream meetings and deliberated in the dark yet somehow produced a letter about “transparency.” It's governance by ghostwriting, not by law. And it perfectly mirrors this administration's approach: manipulate the process, intimidate the opposition, bury reform, then claim credit for accountability. When that fails, blame someone else. ***That same approach is now unfolding with the Comprehensive Plan.***

Mount Vernon residents were supposed to have a voice—a chance to decide whether to fix a broken system. Instead, they got nothing. No ballot question. No debate. No choice. Just a draft letter crafted in secret to flatter those in power.

Why? Because everyone involved knows what would have happened if the reforms had reached the ballot: voters would have chosen competence over chaos.

A few weeks ago, in a Facebook thread in the Mount Vernon Newscenter, some commenters blamed “elitists” on the real Charter Commission for killing the ward system. That's simply false. The mayor and her council allies killed it. Seven commissioners voted to move it forward. The problem isn't elitism—it's the same clique of insiders who have spent their careers killing everything good this city tries to build.

The only lesson the “reconstituted” commission offers is how to fake reform while strangling it. The mayor orchestrated the process. Thompson, Browne, and Gleason enabled it. Pilgrim put her name on it.

Transparency without honesty is a con. Process without law is theater. And leadership without courage appears to be Mount Vernon's curse.

This is an incredible city with so much potential. It deserves so much more than it has gotten. At the very least, it deserves a government that answers to its people—not one that fears their vote.