

# Lawmakers seek limits on CEO

## Bipartisan effort:

Two legislators have pre-filed bills that would weaken the considerable power of DeKalb's highest office.

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The chief executive officer of DeKalb County has an extraordinary amount of power — too much, says a bipartisan duo of state legislators who want to weaken the office.

The CEO position, unusual in Georgia, is a formidable combination of strong mayor and commission chairman, in effect two branches of government rolled into one. State representatives Mike Jacobs (R-Atlanta) and Kevin Levitas (D-Atlanta) say the blend of administrative and legislative powers in one person has diminished political checks and balances.

The legislators, both representing north DeKalb, have pre-filed bills for next year's legislative session that limit the CEO's power. Both bills

would allow county commissioners to set their own agenda and run their own meetings, and one would even eliminate the CEO's veto authority.

"What we want is to reform the government," Levitas said. "There is an imbalance of power."

This isn't the first time critics have contended that the county's power structure is out of whack. Various studies over the years have suggested that the CEO's office has overwhelmed the county commission.

All three people who

it was created in the 1980s — Manuel Maloof, Liane Levetan and now Vernon Jones — have been accused of wielding power with a heavy hand, but so far no one has succeeded with a drastic restructuring.

Critics of the effort say the current structure works well. They point to the county's reputation for services, such as twice a week trash collections, and to the high grades garnered from financial rating agencies that evaluate the reliability of county bonds.

Levetan said that if county commissioners are given additional powers and responsibilities, they will need additional support staff. "It's definitely going to be a more expensive situation," she said.

Supporters of the change say there is an imbalance of power that has prevented commissioners from exercising oversight over county finances and operations. Commissioner Elaine

Boyer, who served with both Levetan and Jones, said commissioners react to policy more often than they set it because the CEO sets the agendas for meetings and

votes to break ties.

"It doesn't make for a good balance of power to have such a strong administration," Boyer said.

Levitas' bill, HB 894, is similar to a bill that passed the state senate during the last session — SB 52 by Sen. Emanuel Jones (D-Ellenwood) and several other DeKalb senators.

Levitas' bill is what's known as local legislation, meaning passage is up to legislators who represent DeKalb, most of them Democrats. But Jacobs has introduced a general bill that

GOP-dominated Legislature, making it difficult for local legislators to block it. Both bills would require ultimate ratification by voters in a county referendum.

Of the two bills, Jacobs' goes the farthest, eliminating even the CEO's veto. Both Jacobs and Levitas said they are working together, and Jacobs said he'll withdraw his bill, HB 899, if Levitas' is successful.

"This is an attempt to get something done no matter what," Jacobs said.

Jones has criticized the movement to restruc-

ture DeKalb in the past, but chose not to comment on the new legislation. Should either bill be enacted, he'll be out of office by the time they would take effect in 2009.

Rep. Stan Watson (D-Decatur), who plans to run for CEO, said he could support Levitas' bill with a few tweaks because "it gives a check and balance" to the county government. Watson said he opposes Jacobs' bill, however.

"There's no head of government in America who has no veto power," he said.