The public trust suffers

The MetroPoll results in today's news column present some stark conclusions. They deserve serious consideration, for they show:

- Most Chicagoleans believe government corruption here is widespread.
- About half those polled think high-level officials are involved in corruption.
- About half doubt the local government will act to stop the wrongdoing.

Those findings by an independent research center on responses to this newspaper's Mirage series support a point we've made repeatedly on this page:

The price officials here must pay to help revive public confidence is to set up an unbiased, outside commission to investigate corruption fully documented by the Chicago Times and the Better Government Assn.

But the City Council dodged its duty two weeks ago when it voted 35 to 3 to shunt off the committee a plan to do that.

That sensible proposal deserves support.

Mayor Bilandic's own responses to the Mirage reports encourage public doubt about how forcefully the city will act. For example, Bilandic said Jan. 12 that his administration had disciplined or fired city employees for wrongdoing in 400 cases last year, implying some were guilty of corruption. Yet repeated efforts by Sun-Times reporters Michael Flannelly and Carol Fain have been unable to pull up supporting facts from Bilandic's office.

Indeed there are two major problems:

- The corruption itself. Serious misdeeds—including payoffs and kickbacks—occur too often. Reporters Pamela Zeman and Zay N. Smith, with BGA investigators, found "business by bribe" considered a common practice in Chicago during the months they operated the Mirage, a N. W. 9th St. tavern.

- The public's lack of confidence. Though officials deny widespread corruption among city inspectors, the MetroPoll reveals three out of four Chicagoleans think otherwise.

Against such broad distrust, Bilandic's order to establish a City Hall unit to investigate charges against city inspectors and his naming of close associates to rewrite city licensing laws won't cut it.

But the proposal that the Council banished to committee fills the bill on both counts. Urged by Alderman Martin J. Oberman (4th), Ross W. Lathrop (30A) and Dick Simpson (44B), it would have the Council create an independent blue-ribbon panel with powers to investigate the Mirage disclosures and take other steps, from examining the Chicago Building Code for unrealistic provisions to recommending management reforms.

If city government has nothing to hide, there's no reason to delay that effort.

Call the resolution back from its committee grave. Then do what's needed to curb corruption and help rebuild trust in government:

- Approve it.