

City of Alexandria, Virginia

MEMORANDUM

DATE: FEBRUARY 12, 2008

TO: THE HONORABLE MEMBERS OF THE CITY COUNCIL

CC: JAMES K. HARTMANN, CITY MANAGER

FROM: MAYOR WILLIAM D. EUILLE & COUNCILMAN JUSTIN M. WILSON

SUBJECT: ELECTION REFORM

The mission adopted by the City Council on September 14, 2004 states that successful government is one that “engages the entire community as it plans for the future¹.” The most basic symptom of community engagement is participation in the electoral process.

Over the past 30 years, that civic engagement, as measured by the percentage of residents participating in our municipal elections, has steadily declined², from 41% in 1976 to 19% in 2006.

In 1992, the City Council expressed concern over the reduction in turnout among voters in municipal elections. At the time, a committee was appointed consisting of George Cook, Mike Holm, Myke Reid, Jack Ticer, Nancy Cox, William Hurd, and Sandra Murphy.

In April of 1993, the Committee provided their report³ to City Council—recommending three changes:

- Decreasing the number of elections by electing City Council members to four-year terms
- Changing the time of City Council elections to the fall
- Making it more convenient to vote by increasing the number of polling places

In March of 2007, again in response to concerns regarding reductions in turnout, the Mayor appointed a new committee to study the issue—this time consisting of Richard Hobson, Becky Davies, Robert Calhoun, Christopher Campagna, Lynnwood Campbell, William Cleveland, Iris Henley, Anna Leider, and Joyce Woodson.

¹ City of Alexandria, “Mayor and City Council, 2004-2015 Strategic Plan.” Adopted September 14, 2004.

² Turnout in 1976 was 41%, 1979 was 39%, 1982 was 37%, 1985 was 36%, 1988 was 34%, 1991 was 30%, 1994 was 29%, 1997 was 24%, 2000 was 25%, 2003 was 27%, 2006 was 19%.

³ Ad Hoc Committee on Election Procedures, “Report of the Ad Hoc Committee on Election Procedures.” April 14, 1993.

In June of 2007, the Committee provided their report⁴ to the City Council—making three recommendations:

- That the current process for Council and School Board elections not be changed
- That the Council and the School Board each have sufficient authority to decide if a pay raise for a future Council or School Board, respectively, is warranted (the process called for under current law), and see no need for this Committee to make any such recommendation.
- That the citizens of Alexandria are better served if the Mayor and Council have adequate staff assistance, and we recommend that each Council member have a Fulltime aide (each member currently has a half-time aide); also recommend that staff assistance for the Mayor be increased by the equivalent of a half-time person (the Mayor currently has the equivalent of one full-time aide).

Both the 1992/1993 and the 2007 committees grappled with a similar set of issues, including:

- Changing the municipal elections from May to November
- Changes in the length of City Council terms
- Staggering the election of City Council members
- Creation of wards/districts for the election of City Council members
- Transition to non-partisan elections for City Council
- Changes to compensation for the City Council

Of these listed changes, City Council has the authority today to accomplish a change in the election from May to November, and a change in compensation for the City Council. The remaining changes that were discussed by the two committees would require a change to the City Charter, and the concurrence of the General Assembly and the Governor.

The Code of Virginia⁵ prescribed that a City might change its elections to November by the adoption of an ordinance by the City Council or by the submission of signatures to the Circuit Court requesting a binding referendum.

Subsequent to the receipt of the 2007 report, the City Council chose to appoint two members of the Council to formulate recommendations based on the 2007 report. As those designees, and in recognition of the significant community interest in this issue, we have the following recommendations to our colleagues:

- 1) That City Council adopts a resolution addressed to the Alexandria Circuit Court, requesting an advisory referendum to appear on the ballot on November 4, 2008, containing the question: “Should the Alexandria City Council consider and adopt

⁴ Richard Hobson, Chair, “Report of the Committee Created to Review the Election Process for the Alexandria City Council and the School Board.” June 21, 2007.

⁵ Code of Virginia. Section 24.2-222.1. Amended 2002.

an ordinance to change the election date of the Mayor, members of the City Council and members of the School Board from the May general election to the November general election cycle?"

- 2) If the November referendum is successful, an ordinance to move municipal elections to November shall be introduced at the Tuesday November 11, 2008 Legislative Meeting, and scheduled for public hearing and adoption at the Saturday November 15, 2008 Public Hearing.
- 3) At the November 15, 2008 Public Hearing, the City Council shall solicit input as to additional changes to our elections that may be required.
- 4) At the November 25, 2008 Legislative Meeting, the City Council shall adopt a resolution including any desired changes to the City Charter. That resolution shall be forwarded to the City's General Assembly delegation for introduction during the 2009 General Assembly session.
- 5) If changes to the City Charter are requested, City Council shall hold the required public hearing at the December 13, 2008 Public Hearing.

cc: Ignacio Pessoa, City Attorney
Bernard Caton, Legislative Director
The Alexandria School Board
Mary LaMois, Secretary, Alexandria Electoral Board
Senator Patsy Ticer
Senator Richard Saslaw
Delegate Brian Moran
Delegate Adam Ebbin
Delegate David Englin

RESOLUTION NO. ____

WHEREAS, Section 24.2-222.1 of the Code of Virginia authorizes the Alexandria City Council, by ordinance, to change the election date of the Mayor, members of the City Council and members of the School Board from the May general election cycle to the November general election cycle; and

WHEREAS, Section 3.13 of the Alexandria City Charter provides that the City Council has the authority to submit any proposed ordinance, question or issue to the qualified voters of the City for an advisory referendum; and

WHEREAS, Section 3.13 of the City Charter and Section 24.2-684 of the Code of Virginia further provide (1) that any such advisory referendum be initiated by resolution of the City Council, addressed to the Circuit Court of the City of Alexandria, Virginia, and (2) that, if the request is found by the Court to be in proper order, the Court shall order the advisory referendum election to be held in within a reasonable time and on a date in conformance with state law; and

WHEREAS, Section 24.2-682(A) of the Code of Virginia permits such advisory referendum election to be held on the same day as a general election; and

WHEREAS, the City Council has concluded that it is necessary and desirable to submit to the qualified voters of the City an advisory referendum on the question of whether the City Council should change the election date of the Mayor, members of the City Council and members of the School Board from the May general election cycle to the November general election cycle; and

WHEREAS, the City Council has concluded that such advisory referendum question should be placed on the ballot at the November 4, 2008 general election, in order that as many qualified voters as possible participate in the referendum election;

NOW, THEREFORE BE IT RESOLVED, that the City Council does hereby request that the Circuit Court of the City of Alexandria, Virginia, order and direct that the following advisory referendum question be submitted to the qualified voters of the City at the November 4, 2008 general election:

Should the Alexandria City Council consider and adopt an ordinance to change the election date of the Mayor, members of the City Council and members of the School Board from the May general election to the November general election cycle?

AND BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED, that the City Council does hereby direct the City Clerk to attest, and the City Attorney to file this resolution with the Circuit Court, in the manner provided by law.

ADOPTED:

WILLIAM D. EUILLE, MAYOR

ATTEST:

Jacqueline M. Henderson, CMC, City Clerk



Chris Marston
<chair@AlexGOP.org>

03/10/2008 10:10 PM

Please respond to
Chris Marston
<chair@AlexGOP.org>

To <alexvamayor@aol.com>, <timothylovain@aol.com>,
<councilmangaines@aol.com>, <council@krupicka.com>,
<delpepper@aol.com>, <paulcsmedberg@aol.com>,

cc

bcc

Subject COA Contact Us: March 11, Docket #31

31
3-11-08

Time: [Mon Mar 10, 2008 22:10:12] IP Address: [68.34.7.123]

Issue Type: Mayor, Vice Mayor, and Council Members
First Name: Chris
Last Name: Marston
Street Address: Alexandria Republicans
PO Box 245
City: Alexandria
State: VA
Zip: 22313
Phone: 703-823-1801
Email Address: chair@AlexGOP.org
Subject: March 11, Docket #31
I've pasted the contents of the attached letter below for your
convenience:

Dear Mr. Mayor and Members of Council:

I write in

reference to item 31 on the docket for Tuesday's Regular Meeting, the
report and resolution on municipal elections. I urge you to postpone the
vote and hold a public hearing before considering the report and
resolution.

The report and resolution depart dramatically from the
report of the Election Process Review Committee appointed in March 2007.

After careful consideration and several public hearings and meetings, in
June 2007, that committee recommended that the municipal elections not be
moved from May to November, as had a preponderance of those who testified
in its public hearings. At the Council's October public hearing on their
report, several speakers supported the committee recommendation.

The

recommendation you will receive at Tuesday's meeting proposes an advisory referendum in November, not something considered by the committee or at the public hearing on its report. The recommendation would include only one of the six principal issues considered by the committee in the referendum, a different context from that considered by the committee. And, it phrases the referendum question to favor change, despite the committee's recommendation against making a change. Before considering the recommended

resolution, you should solicit input through a public hearing on (1) whether the referendum should include other issues considered by the committee, such as length of term, election by district, creation of wards, and the Council's compensation, (2) how the referendum question should be phrased, and (3) at what election the referendum ought to be held.

Comments:

Although the Council does not have plenary authority over all these issues, the Council, through proposing an amendment to the City Charter, would be the key actor in making changes. In fact, the only change that citizens could accomplish without Council action is changing the election from May to November. Any of these other changes would have to be initiated by the Council. That fact makes it even more important to consider soliciting the public's advice through an advisory referendum on these other key issues. Additionally, the resolution of some of these issues could have a substantial effect on voters' choice about the one question you propose to put to them (e.g., a voter might support changing the election date, but only if the terms were extended to four years, so that Council elections would always be held with the same set of other offices).

As the recommendation you will receive tonight notes, your strategic plan seeks to "engage[] the entire community as it plans for the future." Certainly holding a public hearing and considering alternatives prior to voting on this resolution would further that plan. What topic is

more important for engagement than the electoral franchise?

In closing,

I note that the Council has ample time to consider this issue prior to requesting an advisory referendum for the November 4, 2008 General Election. The candidates standing for election in November need not be certified until June, so certainly an advisory referendum question need not be framed by March 11.

Sincerely,
Chris Marston
Chair, Alexandria

Republicans

Attachment: deb9e6ef47df6aa751c959ad1f3a8e5b.pdf



deb9e6ef47df6aa751c959ad1f3a8e5b.pdf

Alexandria Republicans

March 10, 2008

The Honorable Mayor and Members of the City Council
City Hall
301 King St
Alexandria VA 22314

VIA Facsimile and E-mail

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Before considering the recommended resolution, you should solicit input through a public hearing on (1) whether the referendum should include other issues considered by the committee, such as length of term, election by district, creation of wards, and the Council's compensation, (2) how the referendum question should be phrased, and (3) at what election the referendum ought to be held.

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Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading "Chris Marston". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a long horizontal stroke extending from the end of the name.

Chris Marston
Chairman