



***PUBLIC HEARING OF THE GREENBELT CITY COUNCIL held  
Wednesday, February 11, 2009, on Voting Reform.***

*Mayor Davis called the meeting to order at 7:34 p.m. in the Terrace Room of the Greenbriar Community Center.*

*PRESENT WERE: Councilmembers Leta M. Mach, Edward V. J. Putens, Rodney M. Roberts and Mayor Judith F. Davis. Councilmember Konrad E. Herling was unable to attend due to illness.*

*STAFF PRESENT WERE: Michael McLaughlin, City Manager; David Moran, Assistant City Manager; Robert Manzi, City Solicitor; Steve Silvestri, Outside Counsel; and Cindy Murray, City Clerk.*

*Following introductions, Mayor Davis announced this was the second of three public hearings scheduled by the City Council concerning the suggested voting system changes announced at the City Council meeting on January 26, 2009. She explained that Council had considered the comments received at the three hearings held last year, along with written comments sent to Council, and information received from expert research. She said that Council had not yet made any final decisions about any of these suggestions.*

*Mayor Davis said that Council wanted to hear comments on the suggested voting system changes from citizens. She asked all audience members who wished to speak today to sign in and encouraged individuals who did not want to speak publicly to write or email their comments to Council.*

*Mayor Davis said Mr. Silvestri and Mr. Manzi would be available to answer questions, but they would not be revealing the advice provided to Council nor the discussions they had with Council. She reminded audience members that the City was still under the threat of litigation with the NAACP, the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) and the U.S. Department of Justice (USDOJ).*

*Presentations from Counsel*

*Mr. Silvestri provided a history of the issue from the original correspondence the City received from the NAACP and the ACLU alleging the at-large election process for Council positions discriminated against African American citizens and violated federal law. The NAACP and ACLU indicated they were prepared to go to Court to sue the City if changes weren't made in the election process. Additionally, it was also learned that the U.S. Department of Justice had commenced an investigation into the same allegations.*

*Mr. Silvestri reviewed in detail Council's Statement on Voting System Reform dated January 26, 2009.*

*Mr. Silvestri would not identify the expert engaged to review the voting patterns in past municipal, county, state and federal elections, but said he was a professor of political science who was familiar with all types of voting systems. He described the expert as having a balanced view of voting issues, having been utilized as an expert witness for both sides of cases involving Voting Rights Act (VRA) violations.*

*Mr. Silvestri and Mr. Manzi both emphasized the need to address the issue of low voter turnout for Council elections in Precincts 8 and 13. They noted that turnout in those precincts in federal, state and county elections is significantly higher and closer to the turnout in other precincts.*

*Mr. Manzi said that comments received at the three hearings last year indicated that citizens did not want to change the current at-large voting system. He said these views were taken into account when looking for a solution to the problem.*

*Mr. Manzi said the suggested change in the Council election date to the same date as county, state and federal elections should substantially increase voter turnout. He noted higher voter turnout will provide a greater chance of having African American candidates be successful.*

*Mayor Davis then opened the floor to speakers.*

*Lowell Owens, 119 Northway, complimented Council on their suggestions but said Council needs to be reflective of the racial makeup of the community. He recommended Council consider a change to preferential voting, which would allow an African American candidate greater chance for success. Mr. Owens provided Council copies of an article on instant runoff voting produced by The New America Foundation and FairVote.*

*Mr. Silvestri commented the article on instant runoff voting provided by Mr. Owens referenced elections for single winner offices. He said it was unusual to see alternative voting methods used for council elections where there are multiple candidates for multiple seats.*

*Barry Schlesinger, 410 Ridge Road #2, said he does not agree with Council's suggestion of moving the date of the election. He said more information is needed to determine why people aren't participating in the election process before a solution is determined. He also expressed concern that slating will occur if the Council election is held with county, state and federal elections.*

*Jordan Choper, 121 Norway, said he does not support Council's suggestion of moving the date of the election. He noted Greenbelt has a good government and recommends the elections continue on the same schedule. He suggested increased signage for elections.*

*Alice Mitchell, 60 Crescent, said she supports Council's suggestion to move the date of the election and recommends education be provided to citizens on how to become a candidate for Council. She also urged Council to clearly inform citizens on their efforts to build an inclusive community.*

*Che Sayles, 6108 Breezewood Drive, complimented Council for their work on the voting system issues and said he agreed with their suggestions. He said citizens should focus on having the best Council possible, not on the race of Council.*

*Emmett Jordan, 7714 Hanover Parkway, said more needs to be done to find ways to build a more inclusive community. He also said holding Council elections with county, state and federal elections may work in favor of incumbents. He commented on the growth of the City and said he was disappointed Council had not suggested increasing the size of Council.*

*Bill Orleans, Greenbelt, said he supports a change to voting districts. He also asked for the name of the expert who provided analysis of voting patterns and what the cost had been to the City thus far. Mr. Manzi said he would not provide the name of the expert citing attorney-client privilege.*

*Andy Carruthers, 2-M Gardenway, said more information is needed to determine why there is low voter turnout for Council elections. He commented that the election in November is an opportunity to survey voters and make an effort to reach people who don't participate. He expressed concern that slating will become a problem if the Council election is held with county, state and federal elections.*

*Angela Spencer, 7716 Hanover Parkway, asked whether there was a time frame set by the NAACP, ACLU or the USDOJ for Council to make a decision. Mr. Silvestri said there was no clear indication of a time frame but emphasized Council needed to remain proactive in addressing the issues. Mr. Manzi explained the process for a Charter change, which would be required to change the election process.*

*Mayor Davis thanked everyone who participated in the discussion. She said the third public hearing would be held on February 25th, 7:30 p.m., at Springhill Lake Recreation Center. She also thanked Greenbriar for the use of the room.*

*The meeting ended at 9:17 p.m.*

*Respectfully submitted,*

*Cindy Murray  
City Clerk*