



***PUBLIC HEARING OF THE GREENBELT CITY COUNCIL held
Saturday, February 7, 2009, on Voting Reform Issues.***

Mayor Davis called the meeting to order at 10:07 a.m. in the MultiPurpose Room of the Community Center.

PRESENT WERE: Councilmembers Konrad E. Herling, Leta M. Mach, Edward V. J. Putens and Mayor Judith F. Davis. Councilmember Rodney M. Roberts arrived at 10:09 a.m.

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 first of three public hearings being held 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).

Mayor Davis thanked the Greenbelt Neighbors Alliance (GNA) for the comments they had sent to Council.

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 public 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.

Mr. Manzi explained the process for a Charter change which would be required to change the election process. He cautioned that if Council passes a Charter change and the Charter change is reversed by referendum, it would assist the NAACP, ACLU and USDOJ with their case.

Mayor Davis then opened the floor to speakers.

Ed James, 56-D Crescent Road, said he supports staying with an at-large election system. He asked whether Council would consider a non-binding referendum to obtain public opinion. Mr. Silvestri said a non-binding referendum would be of little use and noted the courts won't be considering what the citizens want when determining whether there is a VRA claim, only the voting patterns of the residents.

Sia Finoh, 6162 Springhill Terrace, said the residents of Empirian Village don't feel they belong to the community. She noted she had previously lived in Greenbelt East and had felt she was part of the community when she lived in this area. She suggested action be taken to improve communications with residents of Greenbelt West, especially in regards to the voting issues.

Cynthia Newcomer, 4-V Laurel Hill Road, said she supports a change to election districts along with an alternative voting method such as FairVote.

Bob Rand, 109 Northway, said the voting issue is quite complex but felt Greenbelt should work towards becoming a more inclusive community.

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.

Solange Hess, 2-A Ridge Road, said she had lived in Greenbelt since 1959 and took offense to the alleged charge of discrimination. She encouraged residents who don't feel they are included in the community to read the News Review to find out more about community issues and events and to join a community group.

Tom Simon, 121 Lastner Lane, said he had been a resident since 1978 and expressed concern that local issues would be lost if municipal elections were combined with state and federal elections. Mayor Davis said there would be separate voting machines for the municipal elections.

Barbara Simon, 121 Lastner Lane, said she thought the suggestions of Council were too narrow, only addressing the need to increase voter turnout, and thought more needs to be done to pull the entire community together. She suggested Council appoint an ad-hoc community group to find ways to pull all citizens together into one community. Ms. Simon also said she didn't think a change to election districts would be too drastic a step.

Andy Carruthers, 2-M Gardenway, commended Council for their suggestions and said all citizens will benefit by increased voter participation. He expressed concern that changing the election date to increase voter turnout could have unintended consequences, such as partisanship and more voting disparity.

Ann Lombardi, 37 Ridge Road, said she had worked on voter registration and was disappointed to learn that many citizens didn't realize they could vote in municipal elections. She said she supports a change to district voting.

Eulalie Lucas, 7910 Greenbury Drive, said that English is not the first language of many residents of Greenbelt East and suggested information on voting be available in multiple languages. She also suggested providing information to students at Eleanor Roosevelt High School to share with their parents.

Sylvia Lewis, 2-C Gardenway, said outreach efforts to increase voter participation is necessary. She also said she was strongly opposed to election districts noting the need for the feeling of one community, not a divided community.

Mayor Davis thanked everyone who participated in the discussion. She said additional public hearings would be held on February 11th, 7:30 p.m., at Greenbriar Terrace Room and February 25th, 7:30 p.m., at Springhill Lake Recreation Center.

The meeting ended at 11:48 a.m.

Respectfully submitted,

Cindy Murray
City Clerk