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City Council eliminates election costs

Ordinance expected to save funds in runoff campaigns

by Kimberly Williams | Special to The Gazette

The College Park City Council narrowly passed a cost-cutting resolution 4-3 that would cease mailing voter notifications to residents for runoff elections in favor of posting advertisements for the election in local newspapers.

Ordinance 09-0-02 is exclusive to runoff elections, and general municipal election notifications will remain the same. The newspaper announcement is a minimum requirement of what the city's election board must do to get the word out to the public.

"Because it's such a short timeline, it's difficult to get the notice out and still have the municipal runoff election within a short time period," said Councilman Patrick Wojahn (Dist. 1) at Tuesday's council meeting.

In the concern of public interest and budget saving, the ordinance was proposed to create flexibility in the election publicity process and cut back city funds due to a dwindling economy. Council members said the new measure would save \$1,000 per runoff.

Councilman Mark Cook (Dist. 3) said Wednesday the resolution was unnecessary as there have been three runoff elections in the last 20 years.

"It's an insidious attack on democracy and just disingenuous to say they will save money on something that happens so rarely," he said. "The Election Board should be concerned about the people voting in the election not saving a potential \$1,000 when it doesn't happen that often. It's a small price to pay for democracy."

Currently, the city requires that runoff elections be printed in a county newspaper having general circulation in the city, notices displayed on posters in the affected district and notifications mailed to each registered voter in the affected district.

As voter turnout in recent years is steadily decreasing, 12.7 percent in 2005 and 7 percent in 2007, city officials believe public interest of municipal elections is low, eliminating the need for additional election advertisements.

"I admire everybody who sits [on Council] and goes and does this stuff. But none of you are as charismatic as President Obama," said Jack Robson, president of the North College Park Citizens Association. "People don't have the interest in the city elections, not just in College Park, but every city has a very low turnout for these municipal elections."

Councilman Robert Catlin (Dist. 2) said he couldn't imagine candidates not campaigning just as hard in a runoff election as they did in the previous election.

"I certainly would if I had a runoff election, and I suspect other candidates would also be sure to get their campaign literature to every household that on the voter registration and that information would contain information about when to vote and where to vote," he said.