

Thursday, April 30, 2009

Mark Cook: Election changes hinder voters

As a College Park City Council member, I am filled with great distress that we moved so swiftly on two pieces of legislation that will disenfranchise citizens from participating in the election process ["City Council eliminates election costs," April 16]. Normally the legislative process is at minimum a two-week procedure with public input during the council work session, followed by a council meeting and further discussion a week later. These election changes were rushed through during a two-hour period with a special work session preceding the council meeting an hour later. There was no emergency requiring this abrogation from the standard legislative process.

The city charter resolution to eliminate the requirement to notify voters via U.S. mail of runoff elections will serve to further reduce voter participation in municipal elections. The justification is that it will save money is disingenuous. Over the past 20 years, there have only been a few runoff elections in the city of College Park with the present day cost of mailing these notifications being only \$1,000 per runoff election.

I and nearly half the City Council agreed that our municipality can afford this small price in democracy to properly and fully notify the citizenry of the city, especially when an election is so close that it requires a runoff to decide who the victor is. Unfortunately, a slim majority of council members thought otherwise and voted to end this requirement of our city charter.

Next, the City Council had an opportunity to bring our voter registration closing date inline with what all the counties in Maryland have, which is 21 days before the election. My experience from the Obama campaign and numerous other elections is that many potential voters do not get engaged in the electoral process until the last four to six weeks before an election. The City Council missed the chance to change our outdated 30 day before the election deadline and simply reduce it to 29 days to avoid the deadline from falling on a weekend. The 21-day standard Maryland voter registration deadline would have achieved this same goal and provided consistency for the electorate with gubernatorial and presidential elections.

Finally, we in College Park have a steadily decreasing voter turnout for our municipal elections: 12.7 percent in 2005 and 7 percent in 2007. There are a variety of reasons for this declining election participation: different voting locations to gubernatorial and presidential election polling places, lack of incumbent challengers creating noncompetitive elections and restrictive hours on when one can vote.

The city of College Park is unique in that its polling places are only open from 11 a.m. to 8 p.m. and not the national and Maryland standard of 7 a.m. to 8 p.m. This, in a city where 75 percent of the working population works outside of the county, creating long and difficult commutes for the voters and denying them the opportunity to vote before starting their business day.

On Nov. 3, the city of College Park will hold its municipal elections. All city offices (mayor and all council positions) will be up for election, and I urge everyone to vote, consider even running for office and help us continue the great American experiment in democracy.

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District 3.