



June 15, 2009

City elections belong in fall

Best hope for increased voter turnout is return to tradition

Over the past couple of decades, Salisbury's municipal elections have been moved from the fall, when primary and general elections are traditionally held, to spring, then to fall and finally back to spring, where they remain. All was done in an effort to increase voter turnout in city elections. Anemic turnout indicates or results in a lack of civic engagement on the part of city residents, which can lead to feelings of dissatisfaction and lack of any sense of ownership in community affairs, establishments, institutions and life.

The theory behind the springtime election date is that divorcing municipal campaigns and voting from the sometimes more-compelling state and national elections might encourage residents to focus on local issues and candidates instead of addressing them as an afterthought, especially in presidential election years. There was also the opinion that spring weather is less likely to deter people from the polls than sometimes chilly or otherwise unpleasant late fall forecasts.

There are, however, problems associated with spring elections. For starters, the primary elections can end up being held in early spring or late winter, when there could still be ice and snow on roads.

Weather, however, is the least of them.

The most difficult circumstance created by spring elections involves the city budget, which must be drafted, compiled and presented by the incumbent -- but possibly outgoing -- mayor. While this is not an issue as long as the mayor in office remains in office, it is not fair to a newly sworn-in mayor to be immediately immersed in negotiations over a budget that reflects the vision of his or her predecessor.

All that, and the spring election does not appear to have inspired or motivated registered city voters to come out and cast ballots in higher numbers than they did when the elections were held in the fall.

The issue may soon be -- and should be -- taken up again by the City Council.

The city's recent experience seems to indicate that election date does not have a noticeable impact on voter turnout, but the budget cycle makes it difficult for an incoming new mayor to begin a first term in spring because of the need to implement a budget not of his own doing.

All things considered, moving Salisbury's elections back to the traditional fall dates -- then leaving them alone -- would appear to be the most prudent move.

Additional Facts

In summation

Since moving the city of Salisbury's elections to spring, the hoped-for increase in voter turnout has not materialized. Given the awkward timing for budget negotiations, fall elections would better serve the city.