

City issues

Proposed council district elections raise residency provision questions

By Val Swinton

A charter amendment to have four of the seven Lincoln City Council members elected by district, rather than by the current at-large method, is causing bitter feelings between opponents and proponents of the measure.

The amendment, which will appear on the Nov. 7 general election ballot, proposes that the city be divided into four districts, and one council member would represent each district. The three remaining members still would be elected at large.

Frank Kahn, co-chairman of the Citizens for Fair Representation, which proposed the amendment, says equal representation throughout the city is the basic question involved.

"I think you get a better balance," Kahn said. "I think the east is over-represented."

Currently, five of the seven councilmen live between 70th and 84th streets, the other two live between 27th and 33rd.

Tendency to 'favoritism'

Kuhn says he doesn't think the council is passing legislation more favorable to east Lincoln than other parts of the city, but added that he thinks a majority of the council members tend to favor persons in real estate, as well as developers and the chamber of commerce.

He suggests that by breaking up the block of councilmen from the eastern part of the city, other interests in the city would get equal representation.

"I think Mr. Kuhn is a yo-yo," replied councilman Leo Scherer, when told of Kuhn's comments. "He doesn't know what he's talking about."

Scherer, one of five city council members opposed to the amendment, says district elections aren't necessary. If the voters don't like the stands a councilman takes on various issues, they can vote that member out of office, no matter where he lives, he said.

Scherer, along with councilman Bob Sikyta, does not like the language of the amendment, and Scherer said he thinks there would be a lot of vote-trading done between councilmen from various neighborhoods to try to pass legislation favorable to their own neighborhoods.

"I don't think there's any question about that," Scherer said. "I think there would be favoritism."

He added that under the current system, "I'm elected by the total community."

No problem

But one of the councilmen who favors the amendment, John Robinson, disagrees with Scherer.

"That hasn't been a problem in other parts of the country, and I don't expect it to be a problem here," he said.

Sikyta insists that he's never taken a stand for or against the concept of district elections, but says he is opposed to this particular amendment because of the wording.

"It's not the proposal that went before the charter revision committee," Sikyta said.

He added that any candidate could be elected from one district, then move out of the district the next day, and not have to resign his or her council seat. Even worse, Sikyta said, a candidate could run in a district in which he doesn't even live.

Robinson, an attorney, says he hasn't looked at the wording of the amendment closely enough to judge whether or not Sikyta's concerns are valid. But, he said, even if the amendment is worded that way, the chances of a candidate getting elected to a district he doesn't live in are slim.

Kuhn calls concerns about the wording "a bunch of garbage," and says he has two opinions from the UNL Law College that the wording does state that each candidate would have to be elected from the district in which he or she lives.

Sikyta says another problem with the amendment is timing. It would go into effect next year, leaving little time for the election commission to make the necessary changes, and would also make it difficult for candidates to campaign for election.

Disagreements

"I think Sikyta is raising a lot of hell because his seat is up for re-election and he's probably worried about getting re-elected," Kuhn said.

But Scherer, who's seat is not up for re-election, calls the move less than above-board.

"I think the amendment is an underhanded attempt to get rid of councilmen they don't like. Why don't they just vote them out of office?"

But Robinson says voters of the district should use whatever means legally available to get rid of unwanted councilmen.

"That's the price you pay for being an elected official," he said.

Although the proposed district amendment is stealing most of the publicity in this election, there are five other municipal amendments on the ballot. They include:

- increasing from \$5,000 to \$10,000 the minimum amount for taking bids on goods and services;
- a proposal giving the City Council permission to pave streets less than 1,350 feet long, without approval of a majority of the property owners;
- allowing the city to assess property owners the cost of snow removal after publication of a legal notice;
- removing outdated language in the city charter about horses, mules, and cattle;
- Bringing the city charter into conformity with state law concerning the publication of claims against the city.

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