

Report of the Election Committee

January 21, 2016

On January 11, 2016, the Election Committee forwarded its recommendations to Council regarding proposed changes to Section 602 of the Charter as well as its proposed election process for the coming election cycle. This report describes those proposals as well as the process undertaken to develop them.

The Election Committee currently consists of five members: Lee Ann Anderson (chair), Marty Langelan, Naomi Naierman, Steve Trowern and Natalie Welle. The Election Committee was appointed by Council as provided in Section 602 of the Charter following a solicitation for volunteers. Every member of the Election Committee is a resident of the Village and is an unpaid volunteer who is volunteering his or her time to the Village. The Committee counts among its members new residents and people who have been residents for decades, and the Committee desired to create a process for its work whereby all residents would be encouraged to participate in developing election procedures that responded to past experiences and concerns of residents as well as maintaining procedures where residents believed they were working well.

The Committee solicited feedback on current election procedures and election experiences via e-mail as well as an electronic survey sent to resident. Two comments were received by e-mail and 28 residents responded to some or all of the survey questions. Those responses informed the Committee's proposed procedures as described below.

Part I

Recommended Amendments to Charter Section 602

Charter amendments cannot be effected by the Election Committee. The Committee can recommend proposed changes to Council, which then must follow the procedures under Maryland law to amend the Charter. Council is not bound by the Election Committee's recommendations. None of the amendments proposed and described below will be effective for the next election, although Council is free to agree to procedures proposed by the Committee that do not conflict with the existing Charter. One example of a conflict that cannot be adopted this year is the proposed change to the date of the election.

Date of Election

In response to a public comment at an open meeting, the Election Committee suggests amending the first paragraph of Section 602 to move Election Day closer to the day that new Council members take their seats, but that the date be set to ensure it happens before the end of school when many people leave for vacation. The Committee agreed with the public comment that newly elected members should be seated on Council in a shorter time frame than the charter currently provides. Under the existing charter, new Council members could be elected as early as March 1 yet not seated until July 1.

Nominations, Declarations of Candidacy and Candidate Statements

In response to survey comments, e-mail comments and public meeting comments, the Committee proposed changes to paragraphs (a) and (b) of Section 602 to provide that the Election Committee could specify the format that candidate's statements of interest could take and could hold a public forum, and to clarify that these written statements would be provided or made accessible to residents. A number of the comments the Committee received requested more candidate information as well as standard questions that each candidate should respond to in addition to their general statements of interest. These changes were proposed in response to those comments.

In addition, the Committee made three other changes to paragraphs (a) and (b): First, the Committee suggested that it, rather than Council, should receive nominations. Second, the Committee provided "clean up" language to distinguish between candidates declaring their own candidacy and those nominating third parties and provided a mechanism for determining a nominee's interest on a timely basis. Third, in response to situations that have occurred previously, the Committee elected to set a deadline for declarations of candidacy and nominations and the receipt of written statements. The proposed provisions do not alter the ability to write in other candidates or to conduct a write-in campaign.

In paragraph (c), the Committee proposed that the Election Committee, rather than Council, should set the rules for absentee ballots and proposed deleting the language that only qualified voters who were unable to vote in person could vote by absentee ballot. As reflected in the comments received by the committee and as experienced in the past, travel plans of residents may change at the last minute for any number of reasons, including illness of a family member, work demands or other reasons. As a result, the Election Committee plans to provide a mechanism whereby voters who originally planned to be out of town could vote by absentee ballot at the polls.

In paragraph (e), the Committee proposed some clean up changes to the wording to reflect that new Council members, rather than new Councils, would be seated on July 1.

Part II

Recommended Voting Procedures for 2016

The e-mail comments, public comments and survey comments revealed several consensus views among residents.

First, the Village residents like the sidewalk celebration and in person voting, and the Committee has recommended its retention.

Second, the voting hours should be extended to allow people to vote after work, which the Committee has included in the procedures.

Third, residents would prefer the option to request absentee ballots by e-mail and desire more flexibility to vote by absentee ballot. The Election Committee

incorporated additional flexibility in the ways ballots could be returned and added e-mail as a way to request one.

Fourth, residents believe there should be procedures to keep absentee ballots and in person ballots should be kept private from VMA staff as well as the public. To that end, residents preferred that absentee ballots be submitted to the Election Committee. The proposed procedures incorporate both the privacy concerns and adopt a system whereby on the Election Committee handles completed absentee ballots.

Fifth, although there were some comments in both directions on this, the survey results revealed a strong majority consensus that residents believed that absentee ballots should be accepted at the polls on Election Day.

Sixth, there is not a consensus, and indeed some concern, about the idea of exploring online voting, so the Committee has not done so.

Seventh, although there is mild interest in Sunday voting, the majority of responders preferred the traditional Thursday voting.

Eighth, at least one voter wanted the candidates to certify that they had no conflict of interest such as undisclosed commercial ties to VMA, the Staff or Council. The Committee has incorporated this into the procedures.

Conclusion

The Election Committee will be presenting its recommendations at the Council Meeting on January 21 at 7:30 p.m. and encourages all interested residents to attend. The recommendations, which were developed by your volunteer committee after solicitation of public comment and resident input, are intended to address the input received by residents. The recommendations have been posted by Village staff for your review.

Respectfully submitted,

Lee Ann Anderson

Chair, Election Committee