



WORK SESSION of the Greenbelt City Council held August 18, 2008, with the NAACP and the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU).

Mayor Davis started the meeting at 7:05p.m. It was held in the Terrace Room of the Greenbriar Community Center.

PRESENT WERE: Councilmembers Konrad E. Herling, Leta M. Mach, Edward V.J. Putens, Rodney M. Roberts and Mayor Judith F. Davis.

STAFF PRESENT WERE: Michael P. McLaughlin, City Manager; David E. Moran, Assistant City Manager; Robert Manzi, City Solicitor; Stephen Silvestri, Attorney and Cindy Murray, City Clerk.

ALSO PRESENT WERE: Deborah Jeon, Maryland Chapter of the ACLU; June White Dillard, Prince George's County Chapter NAACP; Amy Ngai, FairVote and numerous residents.

Following introductions, Mayor Davis explained this was the second work session the City had scheduled with the NAACP and the ACLU concerning a letter that was sent by both of these parties to the City in regards to the City's election process. A worksession previously scheduled for May 28, 2008, was postponed at the request of the NAACP and the ACLU. The first worksession was held on June 30, 2008, at which the NAACP and the ACLU were joined by Fair Vote. All three organizations gave presentations, Council members asked questions, and questions and comments were offered by many in attendance.

Mayor Davis stated the City Council has not taken any position on this matter, nor will it take a position tonight. She said the worksession this evening is one more opportunity for the Council to listen to all participants and to gather information.

Mayor Davis commented there were many differing viewpoints in the room and asked everyone to be respectful and open-minded throughout the evening. She asked that no one applaud, cheer, or offer any other loud response and stated Council was looking forward to a positive and productive discussion. She asked all audience members who wished to speak to sign up and said she would call on speakers after presentations were made by the NAACP, the ACLU and Fair Vote. She stated everyone will be given a chance to speak that had signed up, but those who did not speak at the previous meeting on June 30, 2008, would be called first. She asked all speakers to state their name and address for the record when they were called upon.

Mayor Davis thanked Greenbriar for the use of the meeting room. She noted another meeting would be scheduled in Greenbelt West, possibly in early October.

Presentations

Ms. Dillard thanked Council for scheduling the meeting and providing another opportunity to

discuss alternative voting systems for Greenbelt. Based on the statistics on population change in Greenbelt, the NAACP feels strongly all members of the population should have equal opportunity to become members of council, regardless of racial, ethnic or religious background.

Ms. Dillard stated that only two African Americans had ever run for Council. She noted the number of terms each of the current council members had served and referred to their “solid constituencies”. She stated it was difficult for a new candidate to run against an incumbent in an at-large election. Ms. Dillard suggested a change to single member districts would provide more opportunity for a minority candidate to be successful. Ms. Dillard also stated the Supreme Court has ruled at-large elections in other areas unconstitutional.

Ms. Jeon said the ACLU is concerned that a significant number of residents in Springhill Lake and Greenbelt East were disengaged from municipal elections. To address this issue, the ACLU is recommending a three point approach: 1) Increase voter registration and turnout rate with ACLU assistance, 2) Make the most of the turnout there is by shifting municipal election dates to coincide with state and national elections, and 3) Consider structural reform in order to increase racial fairness.

Ms. Ngai apologized for being unable to show her slide presentation due to technical difficulties.

Ms. Ngai stated Fair Vote supports alternative voting methods such as proportional or choice voting. She described proportional (choice) voting and indicated it has helped minorities gain seats in office in other parts of the country.

Ms. Dillard stated the NAACP wants all residents to have the opportunity to serve on City Council. She mentioned the NAACP’s involvement with Baltimore County, Worchester County and the City of Bowie with election reform.

Mayor Davis thanked the NAACP, the ACLU and FairVote for their presentations and asked Councilmembers if they had questions.

Mr. Herling asked Ms. Ngai if the goal of choice voting is to make it easier for all unfamiliar candidates to win, not only minority candidates. Ms. Ngai said unfamiliar candidates have a much better chance of being successful using choice voting. Mr. Herling asked if cumulative voting provided the same opportunity. Ms. Ngai said cumulative voting required a great deal of organization and was often not as successful as choice voting for underdogs.

Mr. Putens asked Ms. Ngai to describe how choice voting had increased voter participation and asked if any workshops had been scheduled to explain choice voting. Ms. Ngai said people tend to become more involved with choice voting. She also said FairVote has done presentations in the past but have not been successful in organizing a public education forum in Greenbelt.

Ms. Mach referenced the ACLU/NAACP statements about increasing voter participation and asked Ms. Jeon and Ms. Dillard if they had any ideas on how to increase citizenship among non-citizens. Ms. Jeon indicated she couldn’t address the citizenship issues. She stated the ACLU

increases voter awareness by leading voter registration efforts in the community, talking to people and getting them more excited about participating in elections. Ms. Dillard stated the NAACP holds voter registration events on a regular basis in malls, churches, schools and recreation facilities. She further stated the NAACP operates phone banks to encourage voters to participate in elections.

Mr. Roberts asked Ms. Ngai if voters had to choose five candidates under the choice system. Ms. Ngai said voters rank their candidates indicating their preference for #1, #2, etc. but noted the number of candidates selected varies by jurisdiction.

Mayor Davis asked Ms. Dillard if the NAACP was planning a voter registration drive in Greenbelt and if they had ever done phone banks for municipal elections. Ms. Dillard said the NAACP is looking for places in the Springhill Lake area and also the Labor Day Festival to hold voter registration drives. Mayor Davis suggested they look at the community area in Beltway Plaza and the Giant Food Store and mentioned members of Council and other Greenbelt residents would be willing to help. Ms. Dillard said the NAACP has never used phone banks for municipal elections alone, only for state and federal elections.

Mayor Davis asked Ms. Jeon if she had information on how voter participation increases or decreases following electoral change which she referenced at the June 30, 2008 meeting. Ms. Jeon said she did not have this information to present as studies show different results. Ms. Jeon stated that the low voter turnout for municipal elections indicates that reform is needed and recommended the reform include holding municipal elections with state and federal elections.

Mr. Roberts asked Ms. Jeon and Ms. Dillard if any areas had ever changed from a district system of voting to an at-large system. Ms. Jeon stated she wasn't familiar with this.

Mayor Davis then opened the floor to speakers in the audience.

Jeanette Gordy, 7701 Hanover Parkway #301, stated she had lived in Greenbriar since 1975, and had once run for Council against six white males. Although she wasn't successful in the election, she said she supported the current at-large election system but felt more needed to be done to increase voter turnout. She commented how kind the city staff, other candidates and the residents had all been during her candidacy.

Anne Oliver, 7929 Mandan Road #104, said she had been a resident since 1981, in both Springhill Lake and Greenbriar, and does not feel the City has ever oppressed minorities. She further stated she had always felt well represented by all council members and there was no need to change the current election process. She commented that the ACLU/NAACP seemed unfamiliar with Greenbelt and suggested they learn more about the City and residents.

Martha Heil, 6-P Plateau Place, said she supports a change to election districts. She stated council members representing their neighborhoods would provide for fair representation for all residents. She further stated she doesn't support choice voting.

James Riordon, 6-P Plateau Place, said he supports a change to election districts which would provide fair representation for all residents. He also commented that the current Council does an outstanding job and he was very proud of all the members.

Angeline Butler, 7929 Mandan Road #204, asked several questions regarding choice voting. Ms. Ngai answered the questions. She said that she supported the current council members who are serving Greenbelt for the greater good of the community and noted that race, religion, etc. doesn't matter if the council members have the best interests of the community at heart. She said the present council members have this quality and she would be unhappy if she couldn't vote for them in the future.

Melissa Rodriquez, 9152 Springhill Lane, thanked the Mayor and Council for their service and said she had been very pleased with their work. She asked the ACLU and NAACP how they are communicating with minorities in Greenbelt noting she hasn't seen any communication from either group in the Springhill Lake area. Ms. Rodriquez suggested the NAACP should have a presence in the elementary school and stated she would be willing to work with Ms. Dillard on communications with the Springhill Lake area residents.

Ken Silberman, 4-E Southway, asked what was being done to change the current election system. Ms. Dillard explained the ACLU and NAACP were interested in participating in public meetings to gather input from the residents.

Ms. Leonie Penney, 127 Northway Road, said she was impressed at how long members of council has served and thought it was a great compliment to them that residents continued to elect them to Council. She noted the problem with low turnout in elections was due to a huge number of young, transient residents who are not concerned with elections in Greenbelt.

Doug Love, 3-D Plateau Place, said he agrees that elections districts would help minorities but expressed concern that a candidate could rent an apartment in a particular district and run for his own personal interests, not necessarily the interests of the entire community. He also said he looked forward to a complete presentation from FairVote to better understand alternative voting methods.

Bill Jones, 15 Greendale, said he supports proportional voting and felt districting is unfair. He asked if the NAACP supports proportional voting. Ms. Dilliard said the NAACP has historically supported single member districts to allow everyone an opportunity to serve.

Tom Jones, 1-C Woodland Way, said a large number of candidates would be needed for success with single member districts. He noted that a large percentage of residents of Takoma Park didn't have a choice in their election in 2007, with only seven candidates running for six election districts. Mr. Jones stated he supports the current at-large system and likes the idea of going to the polls and having a choice. He further stated he thinks the current council does a great job but would love to see a minority candidate run in the next election.

Mat Amberg, 6-E Hillside Road, said he wanted the ACLU/NAACP to withdraw their threat of litigation since they know Greenbelt isn't preventing minorities from participating in municipal

elections. Ms. Jeon stated the ACLU had never contended the city had prevented minorities for running for office or participating in elections, but they would like to work with the community to improve the current system. Ms. Dillard stated the NAACP wants to work together with Greenbelt in a cooperative effort to improve the system.

Joan Falcoa, 114 Julian Court, said she was opposed to single member districts since districts were not established by neighborhoods, but supported proportional and choice voting which would allow newcomers to the community to be elected to council. She suggested increasing the size of council to seven members. Ms. Falcoa asked who gets to decide what direction council will take. Ms. Manzi said a charter change would be required. Ms. Falcoa asked if the NAACP is supportive of any at-large elections. Ms. Dillard said the NAACP research indicates single member districts encourage minority representation. Ms. Jeon stated the ACLU has supported a combination of districts and at-large seats in the past.

Edith Beauchamp, Greenbelt, said she doesn't feel any change in the voting system is needed but suggested finding ways to engage more residents in the community.

Andy Carruthers, 2-M Gardenway, said he is opposed to single member districts and mentioned problems the City of College Park had with their last election. He also questioned what the average turnout was for municipal elections in other areas of Maryland. Ms. Jeon said she didn't have this data but stressed that much greater voter turnout would be achieved if municipal elections were combined with state and national elections. Mr. Carruthers cited low voter turnout rates in recent College Park and Berwyn Heights elections.

Bill Orleans, Greenbelt, said he supported single member districts and recommended the charter be changed to allow everyone in Greenbelt be allowed to run for Council.

Sylvia Lewis, 2-C Gardenway, commented on the large number of Spanish speaking residents in the Springhill Lake area and suggested all communications sent to these residents by the ACLU, NAACP, FairVote and the City be printed in Spanish also. She further suggested limiting the amount of time for each speaker at the next meeting to two minutes.

Joanna Goderre, 1-C Woodland Way, said that choice voting is very popular in some areas of Ireland.

Mayor Davis thanked everyone who participated in the discussion.

The meeting was adjourned at 10:24 p.m.

submitted,

*Respectfully
Cindy Murray
City Clerk*