



***WORK SESSION of the Greenbelt City Council held June 30, 2008, with the NAACP and the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU).***

*Mayor Davis started the meeting at 8:02p.m. It was held in the Council Room of the Municipal Building .*

***PRESENT WERE:*** *Council members 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 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, Fair Vote and numerous residents.*

*Following introductions, Mayor Davis explained this was the first 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. She stated the purpose of the work session was to hear presentations by the NAACP, the ACLU and Fair Vote, to allow the Council to ask questions for information and clarification, and to also allow questions and statements by citizens. Mayor Davis further stated the City Council had not taken any position on this matter nor would it take a position tonight.*

*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 in the order in which they signed up 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, and asked all speakers to state their name and address for the record when they were called upon.*

***Presentations:***

*Ms. Jeon stated it had been five months since the NAACP and ACLU had first contacted the City and she had heard from many Greenbelt citizens since then, some supporting the current at-large system and some expressing concern. She also said the majority of citizens she had spoken with agreed that diversity in Greenbelt government should be increased.*

*Ms. Jeon provided charts detailing voting figures for municipal elections and general elections. She explained the data collected by the ACLU showed a significant section of residents were disengaged from municipal elections. Ms. Jeon stated the ACLU was looking at 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. Dillard stated the NAACP recommends Greenbelt change to single-member election districts in order to have more diverse representation on the Council. She further stated it was difficult for a new candidate to run against an incumbent in an at-large election and smaller election districts would provide an equal opportunity for all candidates. She mentioned the NAACP's involvement when the City of Bowie made the transition to a combination of at-large and election districts resulted in minority representation on their Council.*

*Ms. Jeon stated the ACLU has found residents become more energized, more candidates run for elections and more residents vote when communities change to single member election districts. Ms. Jeon noted single member election districts provide a greater opportunity for minority candidates to win.*

*Mr. Roberts questioned the increased voter turnout with single member districts. Ms. Jeon answered the ACLU has found great voter turnout at the onset when the change is made to election district voting but mentioned that voter turnout sometimes drops in subsequent elections. Mayor Davis asked Ms. Jeon to research this issue further and get back to Council with numbers.*

*Ms. Mach expressed concern with local issues getting lost if council elections were merged with state and national elections.*

*Ms. Ngai said she represented Fair Vote which is a non-profit, non-partisan organization based in Takoma Park, Maryland that works on demographic and electoral issues. She stated that Fair Vote does not believe there is a problem with representation in Greenbelt elections, but believes the voting system itself is unfair. Ms. Ngai explained alternative methods of voting such as choice, proportional or cumulative voting, which have been credited with enabling minority representation in other communities.*

*Mr. Putens commented there would have to be an educational process to explain these alternative voting methods to the community. Ms. Ngai indicated Fair Vote is willing to work with election officials on the education process.*

*Mayor Davis asked what method or formula caused the ACLU, NAACP and Fair Vote to make the decision Greenbelt needed election reform. Ms. Jeon explained the decision was made after examining population changes within the past several years, the low voter participation in municipal elections and the lack of minority representation on Council.*

*Mayor Davis commented Council was pleased to hear the ACLU was willing to help with voter registration and community education. Ms. Dillard indicated the NAACP was willing to assist by using phone banks to encourage voters to participate in municipal elections. Ms. Dillard also indicated the NAACP would be willing to hold candidate forums but would not endorse any candidates.*

*Ms. Dillard explained she would have to leave the meeting at 8:15 p.m. to attend a Prince George 's County press conference regarding the death of inmate.*

*ayor Davis then opened the floor to speakers in the audience.*

*Andy Carruthers, 2-M Gardenway, asked if a Department of Justice representative was in the room. Mayor Davis told Mr. Carruthers this question was not appropriate. Mr. Carruthers then asked for a pledge from Ms. Jeon and Ms. Dillard that their organizations would not use statements made by speakers this evening in any future legal proceedings. Ms. Dillard stated that she was here to share information and to hear from residents. Ms. Jeon stated she was not looking for litigation and would commit to not using statements made in any future legal proceedings.*

*David Lange, 12 Pinecrest Court, stated he was a member of both the ACLU and NAACP and questioned the effectiveness of single member voting districts.*

*Doug Love, 3-D Plateau, stated he was pleased the City was working towards greater diversity but was concerned that the importance of local issues would be diminished if municipal elections were held with national and state elections. He also expressed concern that if voting districts were created, some areas may not have a candidate or have a candidate running for his own personal interests and not that of the community.*

*Leonie Penney, 127 Northway, said she felt fortunate to live in a place as unique and special as Greenbelt . She also asked where the dissatisfied voters were this evening.*

*Bill Orleans, Greenbelt, said that Greenbelt is doing fine but thought it could be better.*

*Joan Falcao, 114 Julian Court, said that she was against single member voting districts but indicated her support of alternative voting such as choice, proportional or cumulative voting. She asked if there was any evidence of Greenbelt residents voting as a block. Ms. Jeon indicated there was no evidence of this but felt minority candidates have been discouraged from running in past elections. Ms. Falcao asked Ms. Jeon the number of residents she had spoken with regarding this issue. Ms. Jeon stated she couldn't provide a number.*

*Terry Burchick, 20 Woodland Way, said he was personally offended when he read about the ACLU and NAACP threat of litigation in the newspaper.*

*Claudia Jones, 7-D Laurel Hill, said the question of single member voting districts should be decided by Greenbelt residents. She also commented on her displeasure with the ACLU and NAACP threat of litigation.*

*Tom Jones, 1-C Woodland Way, said there were only seven candidates in the last municipal election and noted a significantly larger number of candidates would be needed to ensure residents have choices with voting districts.*

*Joanna Goderre, 1-C Woodland Way, said it was difficult to get candidates to run for elected office but felt competitive elections create interest.*

*Matt Amberg, 6-E Hillside, said he recently made a donation to the ACLU in honor of his 90<sup>th</sup> birthday and questioned why they were focused on the voting issue in Greenbelt . Mr. Amberg further stated he was against voting districts.*

*Sylvia Lewis, 2-C Gardenway, said she was a current member of the ACLU and a past member of the NAACP but felt voting districts would create more division in the city.*

*Keith Chernikoff, 210 Lastner Lane, said he was concerned he would lose 80% of his representation on Council with voting districts. He commented that all members of Council are currently accountable to him.*

*Frank Gomez, 17-C Parkway, said he also was offended when he read about the ACLU and NAACP threat of litigation. He commented on the large investment of time and effort required of Council members.*

*Bob Zugby, 94 Ridge Road, said Greenbelt is color-blind and always has been but felt something needed to be done to include representation from all neighborhoods in the City. He suggested increasing the number of Council members with a number being elected at large and a number being elected from voting districts.*

*Bill Jones, 15-D Ridge Road, said he supported alternative voting methods such a choice, proportional or cumulative voting.*

*Evelyn Lewis, 22 Ridge Road #202, said that Council doesn't represent all residents of the city if it isn't a diverse group..*

*Barbara Dickey Davis, 11-D Parkway, said she was proud to be a resident of Greenbelt and felt her concerns had always been heard by council members. She further stated she was offended by the ACLU and NAACP threat of litigation. Ms. Davis also read a short statement that was written by her 9 year old daughter Madison Davis.*

*Jose Riggins, 8150 Lakecrest Drive, said he does not feel the current voting system needs to be changed but thought there was a disconnect between residents living in Springhill Lake and residents living in other areas of the City. He recommended the City become more involved in the Springhill Lake area and educate residents about county and city services.*

*Frances DeBernardo, 13-D Laurel Hill, questioned what happens if voting districts aren't successful in attracting minority representation. Ms. Jeon explained that although a non-minority candidate may win a minority district, it could still be considered successful if more minority voters participate. She mentioned it often takes two voting cycles before an increase of minority candidates occurs. Ms. Jeon stated the ACLU was recommending an improved voting system for Greenbelt, not necessarily voting districts.*

*Ron Alford, 17-E Ridge Road, said the City of Hyattsville encountered problems recently with not having enough candidates running in each of their election districts. Mr. Alford suggested an increase in pay for council members may result in more candidates.*

*Alan Turnbull, 45-H Ridge, said that he supported alternative voting methods such as choice, proportional or cumulative voting, but was not in favor of voting districts.*

*Barry Schlesinger, 410 Ridge Road #2, expressed his concern that if municipal elections were joined with the state and national elections, the importance of local issues were be diminished and candidates may be endorsed by political parties.*

*Clement Lau, 6 Greentree Place , said a change to voting districts or alternative voting methods would be against the spirit of a free election and would not be in the City's best interest.*

*Yohance Ford, 7826 Emily's Way, asked council members if they would comment on how they felt about the lack of minority representation on Council. Mayor Davis said that Council would not be commenting or taking a position this evening. She told Mr. Ford that he could speak to any council members individually after the meeting.*

*Barbara Likowski, 6 Hillside, said candidates for Council first become known within the community from their volunteer efforts with community activities and advisory groups. She questioned why more people don't make themselves known by volunteering within the community.*

*Bob Rand, 109 Northway, stated he was a bit uncomfortable with lack of diversity of Council and felt there would be better leadership from a more diverse council.*

*John Henry Jones, 14-A RidgeRoad, stated that people in general no longer tend to get very involved in their communities. He suggested continued outreach to all residents.*

*Elaine Jones, 14-A Ridge Road, stated that lack of community involvement has to do with human behavior. She also suggested more outreach to residents.*

*Mayor Davis thanked everyone who participated in the discussion. She stated additional meetings on this topic will be scheduled in the future.*

*The meeting was adjourned at 10:20 p.m.*

*Respectfully submitted,*

*Cindy Murray*

*City Clerk*