

To: Annapolis Charter Review Commission

From: Scott T. Gibson

Re: Testimony Supporting Non-partisan Elections

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Thank you for the opportunity to contribute to the Charter Review Process.

One of the most important subjects the City Charter defines is how we elect our City's leaders. On that matter, I would encourage the Commission to affirm the 2011 Charter Review Commission's finding that "(t)he time has come for Annapolis to move from a partisan to a non-partisan election system under which party affiliation would play no official role in the selection or election of candidates for city offices." It should be noted that switching to non-partisan elections was also recommended by the 1996 and 2002 Charter Review Commissions.

Annapolis is best served when its elections include as many voices as possible. Sadly, its current partisan election system favors some and discounts the voices of others.

Nearly one-third of Annapolitans are neither a Democrat nor a Republican, and our partisan election system puts them at a distinct disadvantage when running for office. If these neighbors wish to be on the ballot, then they need to go through an arduous nomination by petition process. Meanwhile Republicans and Democrats simply fill out paperwork, pay a fee, and have their name listed on a primary ballot, where there is a good chance that they will be unopposed. (Not a single Republican City Council primary was opposed in 2017 or 2013. 5 of 8 Democratic Council primaries were opposed in 2017; 2 of 8 Democratic Council primaries were opposed in 2013.) Switching to non-partisan elections would even the playing field for our neighbors, who do not belong to either of the two major parties.

The City's partisan election system also excludes our neighbors who are employed by the federal government and as a result are barred from seeking city office by the Hatch Act. Switching to non-partisan elections would allow these neighbors to run for and hold city office.

In many Annapolis Wards, elections are often decided on primary election day. Primary elections attract fewer voters and exclude unaffiliated and third-party voters altogether. Moreover, primary voters tend to be more partisan than the general population. In 2017, four City Council Seats (Wards 3, 4, 6 and 7) were decided exclusively by the Democratic Primary. Switching to non-partisan elections would invite more people into selecting our elected officials.

The 2011 Charter Review Commission Minority Report worried that non-partisan elections might result in crowded races where the victor was elected with a small fraction of registered voters. With respect to their concern, I'd suggest that the same phenomenon occurs in partisan elections when one party dominates the voter rolls and that party's primary is contested. Consider for a moment, the 2017 election in Ward 6. According to the Official General Election Ward Report there were 2,360 registered voters in Ward 6. The Honorable Shaneka Henson won the Democratic Primary and was essentially guaranteed office with 227 votes – a small fraction of registered voters. In other words, their real concern (i.e., a small fraction of registered voters deciding elections) is occurring under our current partisan election system. Nonetheless, I'd offer that their concern can be addressed by changing from a

plurality wins system to a majority wins system such as the Ranked Choice System used in several places including Takoma Park, Maryland.

In addition to being more inclusive, non-partisan elections are also more cost-effective. Under our existing practice, the City supports the cost of two election days- Primary Election Day and General Election Day. By switching to a non-partisan election, Annapolis would only have to support a single election day operation. Annapolis cannot afford to ignore any opportunity to be more efficient. I'd argue that tax dollars spent on administering primary elections would be better spent on any of Annapolis's community projects needing additional funds.