CCNA

SINGLE MEMBER DISTRICT WHITE PAPER

Kathy Kelly Ohlrich, Past Chair
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In Sarasota County, county commissioners are elected at large. That means commissioners reside in the district they represent, but voters throughout the entire county vote for candidates in all five districts.

An amendment to change to way county commissioners are elected will be on the November 6, 2018, ballot.

Proposed Sarasota County Charter Amendment

It is proposed that this be changed so that each commissioner live in the district, campaign in the district, be elected only by the voters in that district, and be accountable to the voters in their district as well as to the voters of the entire county. This is referred to as Single Member District.

Single Member District voting is used all over the country, including in many larger Florida counties. It is used to elect our senators and congresspersons, state senators and representatives, and in the City of Sarasota commission elections.

Opponents Say

Those who oppose Single Member Districts contend it's not the system that's broken, that good candidates win regardless of the system. They also say no money will be saved by changing the system and that elected commissioners represent constituents of the entire county. They contend that single member districts "disenfranchise" county voters because they will only get to vote for one county commissioner, not five.

Proponents Say

Those who support Single Member Districts contend that commissioners elected at large are not accountable to their constituents, but rather to donors.

As it is now, they contend, candidates with large campaign donations from individuals and PACs hold a great advantage in reaching the entire county and that Single Member Districts would allow candidates with limited funding to concentrate on a more focused area and constituency.

Supporters of the Single Member District amendment believe a representative elected at-large may not feel obligated to represent the wishes of the voters in his/her individual district and perhaps may even find it more politically expedient to appeal to residents living in the county's other districts. Under those circumstances, an individual district might be left without a voice. With the current at large voting system, those district voters might be limited in being able to vote that representative out of office because the entire county votes for the district's

representative. With Single Member District voting, commissioners are more likely to listen to the wishes of their district voters.

Examples of lack of district representation include: Against the wishes of the people in the district, their district's commissioner supported an industrial waste transfer facility next to the Celery Fields. Another commissioner elected to represent his district voted to change setback and height limits for a new hotel development on Siesta that residents in the district opposed. If County Commissioners had represented Longboat Key, Venice, North Port and the City of Sarasota, it seems doubtful that the County's Municipal Parks financial support would have been eliminated.

CCNA Executive Committee Says

Single Member District voting is in the interest of the City of Sarasota and its neighborhoods. The city has not had a strong voice on the county commission in 40 years. The present system is out of balance with some representatives voting against the interests of their districts or ignoring important collective needs. The voters who reside in the city are more likely to have an impact on the voice of their elected county commissioner when the commissioner not only lives in the district s/he represents, but is also voted into office, reelected, and voted out of office by those who live in the district.

Further Reading:

COUNTY DISTRICT MAP

RECENT HERALD-TRIBUNE ARTICLE

H-T GUEST COLUMN OPPOSING SMD

H-T GUEST COLUMN SUPPORTING SMD

CCNA EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE POSITION