

VOTE YES
COUNTY ELECTED EXECUTIVE
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November 2, 2004 is one of those “defining moments” for Wicomico County voters. Question “A” on the ballot presents an opportunity and a challenge to decide the form of government under our charter. Ballot Question A, as submitted by Council Resolution No. 579, will read as follows: “A comprehensive revision of the Charter of Wicomico County establishing a system of government with an elected County Executive who would have executive functions and an elected County Council which would have legislative functions.”

The appropriate VOTE is “YES.”

A County Executive form of government has been a lingering issue in Wicomico County for at least a quarter century. By 1981, the Council-appointed Charter Review Committee carefully studied the issue. In its report, the majority of seven members endorsed it. These members were a knowledgeable cross-section: Senator Mary Nock, Henry S. Parker, Kenneth T. Matthews, Dr. Charles H. Chipman, Richard S. Adkins, Edward G. Banks, Jr. and Marion Barkley. The Council received this report but took no action.

Again, in 2000, the Council appointed a Charter Review Committee. Again, the County Executive form of government was a key study. In its report, the majority of seven members endorsed it. These members were: Melvin J. Caldwell, Jr., J. Wayne Calloway, William G. Duvall, A. Kaye Kenney, Luis Luna, Kenneth T. Matthews, and J. Scott Robertson. This Council agreed to place a “straw vote” question on the 2002 ballot. The result was: In Favor...10,836 and Opposed... 9,854.

In 2003, the current County Council re-appointed a Charter Review Committee to draft the amendments. The Council revised the provisions and, by Resolution, placed it on the November 2 ballot.

This Charter is indeed a “second-generation” Charter! The original 1964 Charter movement was driven by a desire to draft a form of local government to better provide local answers to local issues. Better planning and economic development were prime desires. Specific illustrations included: local authority to extend water lines to a new industry, local authority to donate to hospital expansion, and local authority to engage in dredging the Wicomico River. The voters in 1964 adopted that Charter by a 2-to-1 vote. For a season it has served us well, but the last quarter century has witnessed a variety of shortcomings.

Recent Councils have demonstrated a number of instances where the existing form has been questioned (more so since 1990 and the increase from 5 to 7 members). The absence of a separation of powers with checks and balances has sometimes been reflected in: absence of a single elected voice on issues of the day, budget preparation and proposal by a single elective authority, a more enhanced Council role as legislative and executive oversight.

Several observers have cited a recent example of the failure of the Council form in the absence of separation of powers. A recent Council proposed (to itself as legislature) a tax increase on property of \$.46. When Council adopted its own proposal, a tax revolt resulted in the revenue cap provisions. It is doubtful that an elected County Executive would have proposed such a budget, but rather had found other strategic options.

The Charter Review Committee of 2000-2003 diligently studied the Wicomico Charter in light of present and future needs. They called on expertise from Salisbury University, Maryland Association of Counties, and Elected Executives of three Maryland Counties (two of which adopted the Elective Executive Form when population was much smaller than ours).

The additional salaries and expenses required to make this change constitute less than one-half of one percent of the operating budget of the county. I believe that this expense will be more than offset by realized operation efficiencies and by the benefits of adopting a focused vision for the future.

The proposed Charter provides key features for our local government. Among these are: Separation of government powers with checks and balances; a single elected spokesperson to our citizens, Annapolis, Washington, and other counties; voter accountability for efficient daily operation of government; and improved access and communication.

Dare we hesitate?

The appropriate VOTE is "YES" on Ballot Question A!