

What Voters Need to Know

*What is the origin of the charter amendments that will be on the ballot?
November 2, 2004?*

Over the years the question of creating an elected county executive in Wicomico County has stirred continuing local interest. In 2002, a poll of county voters showed that a majority supported creating an elected county executive. The Wicomico County Council appointed a committee in February 2003 with instructions to revise the county charter to create an executive post. Following numerous public hearings and after extensive deliberations, the committee submitted to the county council its proposed charter amendments. The county council reviewed and revised the document, and in August 2004 it approved the amendments for submission to the voters.

What form of government does Wicomico County have at this time?

Wicomico County is a council-administrator (or council-manager) form of government. Under this form of government, legislative and executive functions are exercised together by the elected county council. The county council is responsible for legislative affairs – it passes local laws and ordinances – and oversees the administration, operation, and management of county departments and offices. An administrative director, working under the direction of the county council, appoints department heads and supervises departments and offices.

If the proposed charter amendments are adopted, how will the form of government change?

Wicomico County government will become a council-executive form of government, in which the legislative branch will be separate from the executive branch of government. Voters will elect both the county council and the county executive. The county council will continue to perform legislative functions. The county executive will lead the executive branch.

Do other counties in Maryland use this form of government?

Six counties elect a county executive: Anne Arundel, Baltimore, Harford, Howard, Montgomery, and Prince George's. All six counties are urban counties, located on the Western Shore near the cities of Washington and Baltimore. If Wicomico County approves the proposed charter amendments, it will be the first in a predominately rural and the first county on the Eastern Shore with an elected county executive.

What will the county executive do?

The county executive will be responsible for the executive branch, including all departments and agencies. Specifically, the county executive will be in charge of the administration, operation, and management of all services and programs delivered to county residents. Almost all day-to-day operations will fall under the control of the county executive. The position will be a full-time job paying \$85,000 annually. The county executive will be elected by the voters when members of the county council are elected and, like council members, will serve a four-year term of office.

What will the county council do?

The county council will enact the local laws and ordinances of Wicomico County. In addition, the county council will perform legislative oversight in which the county council will ensure that county laws and policies are being faithfully followed and executed by the executive branch.

What will the administrative director do?

The administrative director (as well as all department heads) will be appointed, every four years, by the county executive with the consent of the county council. The administrative director will work under the direction of the county executive and assist the county executive in running the executive branch. Similar to what the position does today, the administrative director will perform administrative duties and exercise general supervision over departments and agencies as directed by the county executive.

Besides a county executive are any new positions created?

The proposed amendments create two new positions in the legislative branch: a council administrator and a county internal auditor. Both positions are to be hired by the county council and will work under its supervision. Under the amendments, the council administrator is directed to keep the minutes and the journal of the county council and perform other duties as directed. The county internal auditor is directed to audit the accounts of departments and agencies and perform operational and performance audits. The amendments also empower the county council to hire other unspecified staff as needed, including experts, consultants, and attorneys to assist in the conduct of legislative affairs.

Are any duties shared by both the legislative and executive branches?

The county council will share authority with the county executive for establishing the general organization of the government; both branches will determine the departments and agencies that exist and the relationship of those departments and offices to one another. Both branches will be involved with hiring heads of departments. Both branches will be involved in establishing the rules and regulations that govern employee behavior. Furthermore, both branches will be involved with establishing the county budget; both will determine what local programs and services will be funded and the amount of funds available to each service and program.

Do the proposed charter amendments change the preparation of the county budget?

Instead of the annual budget being prepared under the supervision of the administrative director (as it is done today), the budget will be prepared under the supervision of the county executive. Otherwise, the process of preparing the budget is not changed significantly.

Who approves the county's final budget?

The county executive submits the proposed budget to the county council for its review and deliberation. Under the proposed amendments, the county council cannot change the form of the proposed budget, alter revenue estimates (other than to correct mathematical errors), add items or increase proposed expenditures. The county council can decrease or delete items in the proposed budget. Ultimately, the county council must adopt the budget by June 15 each year, but if it fails to adopt the budget by this date, the budget submitted by the county executive will be adopted automatically.

Is the passage of laws and ordinances affected by the proposed charter amendments?

The county executive will have veto authority over most laws and ordinances. The veto must be exercised within 21 calendar days after legislation is enacted by the county council. The veto must be in writing. The vetoed legislation can still become law if at least five council members vote to override the veto. The annual budget and appropriation bill is exempt from the veto. Matters relating to the county internal auditor are exempt from the veto.

If these charter amendments are approved, when will voters elect the first county executive?

The voters will elect the first Wicomico County Executive in November 2006, along with all members of the county council. The new government will take office December 5, 2006.

How much will the changes cost annually?

Annual costs are difficult to estimate because they depend on the decisions and actions of elected officials who have yet to be elected. However, initially, annual costs between \$300,000 to more than \$400,000 have been estimated to cover the expense of new positions (for example, the county executive, council administrator, and county internal auditor) and support staff.

Why do the advocates of the charter amendments want a change?

Supporters of the change believe that sophisticated operations like those run by the county government deserve to be under the management and control of one person, elected by the voters and accountable to them. Moreover, a full-time county executive will be able to scrutinize programs and services thoroughly and carefully, which can help improve government performance and efficiency. As the head of the government, the county executive will be the chief spokesman and lobbyist for the county. This will allow better communication with state and other local governments because the county will be speaking with a unified voice. The position also provides the potential for creating strong political leadership in the county that can be used to better organize public initiatives.

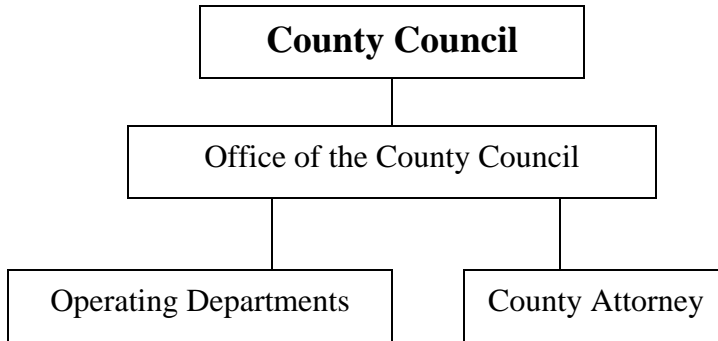
What do opponents say of the changes?

Opponents believe that the county is not ready for a county executive, that the form of government it has today is one that is best suited to the county's population and character. The change is risky because it places extensive operational and political power in the hands of a single individual. The charter provisions do not provide assurances that well qualified candidates – people who can actually manage an organization the size of the county government - will stand for election. The additional cost to the county is another concern. Paying for two branches of government may limit the county's ability to fund new programs and services.

What should voters be thinking about?

Not since the county adopted home rule in 1964 have such significant changes been proposed for county government. To date the county government has been run by a single governing body. If the governing body is separated into two branches, do voters think improvements will be seen? Will the cost impact be outweighed by any improvements? Will the two branches work well enough together so as not to jeopardize government efficiency and effectiveness? Will problems arise from reducing the council's involvement in day-to-day management? Are there advantages to having a single head of government in Wicomico County? Are the experiences in other counties with an elected executive relevant to Wicomico County? Will well qualified candidates run for county executive and be elected?

Existing Governmental Structure



Proposed Governmental Structure

