

Wednesday, November 16, 2011

## **Proposed Montgomery County legislation would allow voting by mail**

### **Bill would apply to special elections**

by Erin Cunningham, Staff Writer

Montgomery County voters would be able to cast their votes in special elections through a mail-in ballot under legislation proposed by a state lawmaker.

Mail-in ballots would save the county money and encourage more voter participation in typically low-interest special elections, said Sen. Jennie M. Forehand (D-Dist. 17) of Rockville, who has prefiled the bill.

Voter turnout in the county for five special elections between April 2008 and May 2009 — made necessary after the deaths of two County Council members and the resignation of former U.S. Rep. Albert R. Wynn — ranged from 6.8 percent to 11.5 percent. Combined, those five elections cost \$5.4 million.

“I’m always on the lookout to save money,” said Forehand, who introduced similar vote-by-mail legislation in 2010 and 2011.

Forehand also expects to introduce another bill during the General Assembly’s 90-day legislative session that would allow jurisdictions statewide to adopt voting by mail in special elections, she said.

In states such as Oregon that have adopted mailed balloting, the cost of conducting an election has decreased as much as 50 percent — in part because fewer poll workers and electronic voting machines were needed. In 2010, the Montgomery County Board of Elections estimated that about \$1 million could be saved per election conducted by mail.

Voter participation in states such as Hawaii also has increased since the state began mailing ballots. In 2010, 54 percent of voters in Hawaii returned mail ballots in a congressional special election.

“Given the dreadful turnout we had last time, we need to make it easier for people to have access to the voting experience,” said Montgomery Councilwoman Nancy M. Floreen (D-At large) of Garrett Park.

The Montgomery County Council, which has not taken a position on Forehand’s bill, said Nov. 8 that it’s likely at least one polling place would be available even if the county adopted mailed balloting.

However, Councilman George L. Leventhal (D-At large) of Takoma Park said that in larger council districts — or for at-large races — it might not be fair to limit in-person voting to one location.

County Executive Isiah Leggett (D) supports the bill, and the county's Board of Education has endorsed similar legislation in the past.

Critics of voting by mail say it could lead to fraud, but there has been no evidence of that, said Todd E. Eberly, a political science professor at St. Mary's College. He points out that the state already allows voting by mail for voters who request absentee ballots.

Under Forehand's bill, every registered Montgomery voter would receive a ballot in the mail.

"The greater threat that voting by mail sort of poses for politicians is then you no longer know who the electorate is," Eberly said. "It introduces some degree of unpredictability. I think this is what causes the greatest amount of resistance."

Voting by mail, he said, could introduce entirely new voters to the mix who otherwise were prevented from making it to the polls.

"The parties worry a little about what this might do to their voting coalitions," Eberly said.

Eventually, he expects that all of Maryland's elections will be conducted via mail.

"It would save money and the voters seem to like it," Eberly said. "Eventually, I think that sort of wins out and that's the way we go."

However, Leventhal recognized a possible problem with that plan.

"I don't know that there will be a postal service in the long run," he said.