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COVINGTON REPEALS WARD SYSTEM.

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Date: July 18, 2007

From: The Kentucky Post (Covington, KY)

Publisher: ProQuest LLC

Document Type: Article

Length: 750 words

Full Text:

Byline: Luke E. Saladin, Post staff reporter

It was one election cycle and done for Covington's ward system.

The Covington City Commission by a 3-2 vote on Tuesday repealed the city's ward system of elections amid controversy that was reminiscent of the criticism lodged at the commission when it adopted the ward system in 2005 in preparation for the 2006 election cycle.

In choosing to do away with the ward system -- in which candidates run for seats representing four different sections of the city rather than having all candidates run out of the same pool, or at large -- the commission went against the recommendation of a committee it appointed to make a recommendation on the ward issue.

Commissioner Jerry Stricker, who pushed for the adoption of the ward system in 2005, was one of those who voted to repeal it on Tuesday.

"I hope you will respect my right to change my mind," Stricker told the audience. "Right now, I feel the community is split 50-50 on this issue, so I am voting my conscious."

The change will go into effect in time for the next city election in 2008.

Prior to the 2006 election, city commission candidates ran at-large races, with the top four vote-getters receiving seats on the commission.

The commission voted in the summer of 2005 to create four wards, each to be represented by a commissioner who lived in the ward. Voting was still conducted citywide.

If more than two candidates filed in one ward, a primary narrowed the field to two, who then faced off in the general election.

Some residents opposed the ward system, saying the city commission didn't give residents a fair chance to learn about the wards and voice their opinions before the city commission approved it.

After the November general election, Stricker and Commissioner Jerry Bamberger proposed doing away with the wards, saying they had not accomplished their stated goal of stimulating debate and encouraging more candidates to run.

While many residents were unhappy with the ward system, though, there appeared to be an equal number who wanted to keep it, prompting the commission to form the committee to study the issue.

That panel presented a report to the city commission last month in which it recommended keeping the ward system, but noting that the city needed to do a better job of educating citizens on how it worked.

Bamberger and Mayor Butch Callery joined Stricker in voting to repeal the ward system, saying they believed it didn't accomplish its goal of attracting better candidates and stimulating debate during the 2006 election.

"I think people were generally confused about how the ward system worked," Bamberger said. "I don't think we gained anything from it."

Callery, who opposed the creation of the ward system in 2005, said he felt the city was too small to ensure that there were quality candidates in each ward.

Callery also said that some wards had more than one quality candidate, both of whom could have been elected had the election been a field race.

Commissioners Steve Megerle and Sherry Carran, both of whom favored keeping the ward system, said the decision disregarded the recommendation of the committee appointed by the city commission that studied the issue and recommended keeping the wards.

"I think doing this is going to discourage civic engagement," Carran said. "I hate the way the ward system was adopted, but the committee spent a lot of time getting input from the community on this issue, and I don't think it's right that we just ignore it."

Rob Petersen, a member of the Licking Riverside neighborhood association who served as an alternate on the wards committee, said members of the group felt as if they just spent the last few months researching an issue that had already been decided.

Petersen believes some on the city commission were threatened by the ward system because it forced them to defend their records against another candidate.

"It's really discouraging," Petersen said. "I don't know why they asked us to do this if they were just going to turn around and ignore it."

Bamberger said he appreciated the group's efforts, but said he just felt that the ward system wasn't working.

"I just couldn't find anybody that liked the ward system," he said.

Callery agreed.

"I'm not slapping the committee in the face," Callery said. "I respect what the committee has done, I just don't think the ward system was right for a city like Covington."

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Source Citation (MLA 9th Edition)

Saladin, Luke E. "COVINGTON REPEALS WARD SYSTEM." *Kentucky Post* [Covington, KY], 18 July 2007, p. A2. *Gale OneFile: News*, link.gale.com/apps/doc/A166583914/STND?u=covi21805&sid=bookmark-STND&xid=6de9c79f. Accessed 7 Mar. 2025.

Gale Document Number: GALE|A166583914