

Single Member Districts - Board of Directors Discussion Guide

Prior to 1992, Sarasota County elected their county commissioners on a countywide basis (all voters get to vote on all commissioners). That year, voters passed a single-member voting districts (voters only get to vote on the one out of five commissioners that live in their district). By 1994, voters realized that they had made a mistake and returned to at-large county commission districts.

In 2018, there will be a measure before Sarasota County voters to return to a single-member district voting system.

Arguments for single-member county commission districts

1. Reduces the cost of campaigns for politicians allowing “regular” people to run and win campaigns. There is no empirical evidence that single-member districts actually produce this result.
2. Local (single-member) issues come to the forefront for discussion during the campaign and therefore receive more attention when someone is elected.
3. Kindra Muntz’s editorial supporting single-member districts – (see attached)
<http://www.heraldtribune.com/opinion/20180603/muntz-vote-for-single-member-districts-against-big-money-machine>

Arguments against single-member county commission districts

1. Single-member districts cause parochial political decisions – There will be five diverging interests when voting on local, state and federal issues.
2. This proposal disenfranchises voters. This measure asks voters to disenfranchise themselves from voting. In effect, voters can now vote for 100 percent of the positions on the county commission including the chair. If this measure passes, each voter will only be able to vote on 20 percent of the commissioners who represent them, and will only have the chair represent them once every five years.
3. There are 20 counties in Florida that have “pure” single-member districts. Just four, are larger than Sarasota County – *Miami/Dade (which is a hybrid – see below), Brevard, Palm Beach and Broward. I doubt anyone who supports this measure advocates for Sarasota County following in the footsteps of Miami/Dade, Broward and Palm Beach counties. It is more likely that the author is comparing Sarasota to counties like Orange, Hillsborough, Manatee and Pinellas that have a “mixed” system where voters either get to vote on a strong executive mayor who is elected county wide or voters get to vote on a majority of commissioners like Hillsborough County where voters have four single-member districts and three at-large districts allowing voters to participate in four out of seven elections.
4. Recently, a sitting state representative said that it would be extremely hard to fight for state appropriations for our community if there are five diverging voices clamoring for different needs. “It will be hard for me to advocate for projects for the county at the state level if there are five commissioners asking for five different things.”
 - a. For instance, in Miami, there are 13 commissioners, but 21 state representatives and six state senators who represent part of Miami-Dade County.
 - b. There are 10 state representatives for both Broward (five senators) and Palm Beach (four senators) counties and
 - c. Sarasota has five members of the house and just one senator.

Cox: Beware of the single-member County Commission initiative

By Jack Cox

Posted May 20, 2018 at 3:53 AM

A seemingly benign but potentially earthshaking measure is likely to appear on Sarasota County ballots, possibly in the November general election.

The ballot summary would read: "Changes the method by which County Commissioners are elected. Currently each is elected by voters county-wide. This Amendment changes election to single member districts so that each County Commissioner is elected only by the voters in the district that they seek to represent."

The measure, led by the Sarasota Alliance for Fair Elections and supported by the Sarasota County Democratic Party, proposes that each of Sarasota's five districts elect its own commissioner, and only its own commissioner, to serve on the Sarasota County Commission. Currently, all five county commissioners are elected at-large by the entire voting populace.

It's important that the people of Sarasota County understand the potentially devastating changes that would occur if this change were enacted. And in fact, educating voters has always been a part of this issue in Sarasota, dating back a quarter-century.

In 1992, a similar measure was put on the ballot, despite protestations that single-member districts would create "ward politics" in which commissioners squabble and horse-trade to finagle petty advantages in order to curry favor from the voters in their district, at the expense of Sarasotans everywhere else. The measure passed 54 percent to 46 percent.

But after just two years, residents realized the passage of the measure was such a big mistake that, in 1994, Sarasota County voters reversed their initial decision and chose to return to at-large elections.

To be sure, the concerns of 25 years ago are amplified exponentially in today's fractious political environment. Measures like these epitomize everything that is wrong with Washington, D.C., today — too much division down party lines — not something we want to see here in Sarasota County.

Sarasota is facing countywide issues — especially the many variables involved in healthy growth and development — that require unified leadership. Single-member districts throw away any semblance of countywide vision in favor of a system that pits every district against the others in a battle for money and influence.

Furthermore, it threatens to decrease voter turnout and guarantee inferior candidates get elected if people can only go to the polls to vote for a County Commission candidate for their district alone.



Opinion

Muntz: Vote for single member districts, against big money machine

Posted Jun 3, 2018 at 2:19 AM

It's time to give voice to the voters.

Today, all five Sarasota County commissioners are elected countywide. It takes big money to run countywide, for expensive mailers and more.

As a result, local development interests heavily bankroll their Commission candidates, using dark money political action committees and subsidiaries to avoid limits, packing our mailboxes daily with glossy fliers. Once elected, their commissioners frequently return the favor, giving the developers a major return on investment. They spend thousands to gain millions. They would not keep doing it if it didn't work.

Grassroots candidates often run, as they are doing this year — Republicans as well as Democrats — but they face an uphill battle against the big money machine.

Is it any wonder that our traffic, neighborhoods, taxpayers and environment suffer from growth out of control, rather than balanced and sensible policies to protect us all? Examples abound: the Whole Foods wetland paving, reduction of hotel intensity limits on Siesta Key, advancing of density increases at congested Stickney Point Road and U.S. 41, gutting of the Comprehensive Plan's limits on developers, inadequate impact fees and unbalanced budgets and even two commissioners voting for concrete crushing next to the Celery Fields. It's just not sustainable for our economy and quality of life.

So we have a solution.

This November you may see on your ballot a referendum to change County Commission elections to single-member districts. Thousands of citizens, from different parties and none, have signed petitions to get it there.

and the development interests reacted by getting the County Commission to put repeal on the ballot, which they then spent heavily to support. The reform worked then and it will work again if the voters put it back in our charter.

Cox warns of "inferior candidates" being elected under single member districts. What he fears are candidates less subject to the bosses' control.

Our Founding Fathers wanted to establish a government that was close to the people. This is a good way to do it.

It will be a long ballot in November. But one of the most important votes, crucial to your quality of life and that of generations to come, may be near the end.

Please look for it, disregard the well-funded attacks of the big money machine, and vote "yes" for integrity in local elections, "yes" to change County Commission elections to single-member districts.

The voters deserve their voice.

Kindra Muntz is president of the Sarasota Alliance for Fair Elections (SAFE). Online:

<http://www.keepdemocracysafe.org/act-now>