

## **TURNING OUT VOTERS**

By William Nicoson

Winston Churchill reminded us that democracy “is the worst form of government” except for all the others. G.B. Shaw thought democracy “substitutes election by the incompetent many for appointment by the corrupt few.” In any case, democracy fulfills its comparative promise only to the extent that the “many” take the trouble to vote.

In last year’s election for Reston Association directors, 24,676 ballots were mailed to RA members of which 4,576 were returned, or about 18.5%. The issues facing the RA board then and now have never been more critical to the lifestyle of Reston residents. On the expense side, many of RA’s recreational facilities are reaching the end of their useful lives; the growth explosion in the area has multiplied non-permeable surfaces at a scale disastrous to our ecology; and RA faces a massive rent increase when its current headquarters lease expires in a few years. On the income side, residential build-out has ended the revenue stream from new RA units; and RA’s assessment, in the absence of user fees, is approaching an arbitrary ceiling established when operating costs of recreational facilities were largely borne by user fees and has already hit another ceiling established for apartment buildings.

RA’s primary mission is “to conserve and protect the value of all property” of its members. That property for many members is their principal investment, and it’s certain that RA’s operations or lack of them have a significant impact on the value of Reston property. Electoral truancy under these circumstances is mind-boggling.

Turnout for the county election last year was better than for RA, even though Republicans ran no candidate to chair the Board of Supervisors. Of the 537,096 registered voters in Fairfax County last November, 155,459, or 29%, voted for incumbent Kate Hanley or for 1 of 3 independent challengers. Usually voter turnout is substantially increased when state or federal executive officers will be determined. Yet, ironically, it is in local elections that each vote carries the greatest weight and exercises the most immediate impact on voters’ interests.

The Reston Community Center and Reston Citizens Association, like RA, exert positive influence on the lifestyle of residents and therefore upon property values. Ballots cast in last year’s RCC preference poll were 415 and in RCA’s election 563, among some 40,000 eligible voters, or about 1% in each case. These results are far below the RA turnout because RCC and RCA, instead of mailing ballots, simply open polls for several hours on a weekend day outside grocery stores and the Reston Regional Library.

Traditionally the RCC poll has been held in October and the RCA election in April. In an effort to boost turnout for both organizations, RCA suggested joint polling with RCC on a single day and at shared locations. When the RCC board voted down this idea, RCA’s President, John Lovaas, announced a unilateral change of election date to coincide with RCC’s date.

Negotiations are now underway for combined polling on a trial basis.

Another proposal is under review by RA lawyers, involving use of a single envelope to mail RA and RCA ballots to voters within RA's jurisdiction. Having nowhere to go but up, turnout for RCA would skyrocket. On the other hand, RA's turnout might slump due to voters' disinclination to deal with added complexity. RCC might even be tempted to join the envelope in search of skyrocketing democracy, producing ever more complexity. Anyone for merger?

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