

Submitted: Gary Osterhout

Position: Oppose

Received: 10-17-2016 08:07 am

Agenda Item:

2. ORD 16 0026 Ordinance Establishing New General Municipal Election Dates to be Held in November of Even Years beginning in November 2020, to Meet State Mandates Imposed by California Senate Bill 415 (City Clerk Tamura). ADOPT ORDINANCE NO. 16 0026 Draft Ordinance No. 16 0026

Comment:

I am opposed to joining our municipal election with a November general election. If we must move, a June election would be better. There is so much more you could do if you really want to increase quality turnout (see MBRA article attached). Consider that the increase will be, at best, only a few hundred votes (based on projected 20-36% increase). If one needs to encourage "bottom up" voting (which, by the way, would likely increase "no" votes to a bond), that directly identifies the problem.

(Attachment Included)

If All Politics Are Local, Why Not a Local Election

By Gary Osterhout

At the July 19, 2016 council meeting, staff was directed to prepare a resolution to change the date of distant future Manhattan Beach elections to November. This was in response to an imposed change under state law due to our rather limited voter turnout for municipal elections in comparison with primary or general elections. This will ultimately require adjustment of councilmember terms.

Specifically, to comply with passage in California of SB 415, the proposal, if continued forward, would stipulate that members elected in March 2017 and March 2019 will serve three years and eight months, bringing their terms to an end in Nov. 2020 and Nov. 2022, respectively.

Conformity with the general or primary election is supposed to increase voter participation.

Wayne Powell writes into the Beach Reporter “SB415 requires our city move its obscure municipal election dates to statewide election dates for greater voter participation.”

“I want elections as soon as possible. Not in two years, not in three years, not in six years. I want elections as soon as possible to get up to 50, 60, 70 percent voter turnout,” Tony D’Errico said in a July 21 Beach Reporter article.

Mark Burton, in a July 13th Beach Reporter article said, “I’m a proponent of voter participation, and last election, the voter turnout was abysmal. This November would be the best way to do it to get a much better turnout where everyone is engaged.” In the June 8 Easy Reader: “The sooner we get to an even-year election cycle, the more robust the turnout, the better.”

However the councilmembers might profess a deep concern (or crocodile tears) on voter turnout, they have not done much to encourage turnout prior to this action—and one might argue they have been responsible as much for the steady decline. And instead of more voter participation and engagement, this proposal could just obscure the number of disengaged voters, given that many will just voting for city council because they are there anyway. More numbers, but no accountability as to better results. The results mask the real objective.

As reported in a Stanford Social Innovation Review, “Improving the representativeness of the electorate, and knowledge about policies at stake, may be a more important (and realistic) goal than dramatically increasing overall turnout.”

There is no panacea that increases turnout—a mix of strategies is needed, each (on their own) with incremental effects. The impact is long-term, but will have better results.

Simply, if more people are involved with democracy and politics between election cycles, it will lead to a higher voter participation rate.

Improving the representativeness of the electorate, and knowledge about policies at stake, may be a more important (and realistic) goal than dramatically increasing overall turnout.

Even basic Wikipedia posting on voter turnout reflects: “The salience of an election (the effect that a vote will have on policy) and its proportionality (how closely the result reflects the will of the people) are two structural factors that also likely have important effects on turnout.”

And it is this “salience,” the ability of residents to understand and impact policy, is where I find our local government falls short.

There is only so much time an average resident can afford to keep track of what is going on with the city. Thus, we rely on our leadership sources to provide us a clear message of issues, alternatives, and choices by which we can make an informed decision. But what we generally receive is little analysis, an overload of useless information, and City Hall public relations spin or drama. The “Open City Hall” surveys have been either phrased poorly or in a manner to achieve City Hall-desired results. Our finance/budgeting process are arcane and unfocused.

Blame the candidates, too. Bill Victor aside, did any of the candidates this last election really distinguish themselves from the others in respect to past meaningful issues championed or conventional assumptions challenged? Does any candidate last election or any other even provide a crystallized vision for the future beside perhaps some ephemeral “small town” preservation support that seems perverted as soon as the next developer steps to the podium or Community Development makes another “discretionary allowance”?

For the most part, the campaign issues we get presented are straight out of the highest responses to the bi-annual resident satisfaction survey, with assistance to seniors thrown in (even though there is no evidence our seniors are underserved) because seniors vote the most. And if there are any definitive positions taken by candidates, most are quickly forgotten.

Further, joining the municipal election with state and national elections only serves to bring political partisanship to our local vote, where we have been relatively free from such influences in the past. It is not difficult to perceive that animated members of a national or state campaign would want to use their current efforts to elect supportive councilmembers. Nor is it difficult to envision that local candidates will attach themselves to whatever national/state candidate or party seems popular at the time. More extra-local special-interest groups are also engaged at that time.

It will also be more costly for local candidates to get their message to the likely electorate during a national election than to those voters they know are engaged at the local level. That expense could be chilling against a desire for a more robust slate of candidates.

Our local issues will be obscured by national and state issues (and propositions), such that we will lose our unique local flavor in this aspect of our civic life as well.

The solution is that our leaders need to be progressive in increasing turnout by engaging and empowering public participation, through meaningful community outreach and involvement.

The last time voter turnout was taken up by Council was 2010. Despite knowing that resident engagement and involvement a long-term perspective was needed, our council decided that the best

they could do is to authorize free return postage on vote-by-mail requests, as if the cost of a stamp prevents Manhattan Beach voters from casting a vote. But at least they rejected one incumbent's suggestion that the solution was to hold a voter registration contest with Hermosa.

We have no real media forum for bringing out choices and alternatives or developing community vision in the absence of City Hall/council leadership. The Beach Reporter is suspect from the outset given the amount of advertising revenue they receive from City Hall, and their reporting is rarely proactive.

The Daily Breeze, in their local endorsements, never mentions those candidate attributes one usually expects from the media, such as transparency, accountability, intelligence, trustworthiness, or vision. Instead, past endorsements seem to have been written based on extracts from the candidates' own representations in their campaign materials. The Easy Reader does the best, though past surveys show few in M.B. really read the Reader.

It also has to be accepted that we have a large percentage of residency churn in Manhattan Beach, in that we have a sizable number of our population that is only around for a couple years. Not only does it make it difficult to engage such short-termers, but that also skews the general election-to-local election turnout percentages.

While the change to a November ballot will likely be in motion before this article is read, I would prefer to remain with the March election or, absent that, to a June election. November is way too active for any local benefit (consider also the relative lack of School Board resident participation given that Board's November election).

From my perspective, until we demand better from those in position to assist with voter engagement, not merely turnout, we can pretty much accept anemic resident engagement. Which, unfortunately, could easily lead to a more autocratic and authoritarian City Hall, and less of a resident-run city.