

## Straw poll sought on method of electing commissioners

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ANNAPOLIS — Legislation has been introduced in the Maryland House of Delegates to put a straw poll on the November ballot asking for the public's opinion on whether the method of electing Queen Anne's County Commissioners should be changed.

House Bill 1344, introduced Feb. 12 by Del. Steve Arentz, R-36-Queen Anne's, would "determine the sense of the voters of the county" on whether commissioners should be elected by district — except for the at-large commissioner — and whether commissioners should be elected on a staggered basis.

The straw poll would not be a vote on whether to move ahead on either issue, said Mike Bowell, a member of a committee formed by the Queen Anne's County Council of Governments to study both matters.

"I have made it clear that this is only a straw poll. It's not binding. It's simply suggesting how the voters would like to see things work," he said at the COG meeting on Wednesday, Feb. 9. Bowell is also a Queenstown Town Commissioner.

The COG sent a letter to Arentz and Sen. Steve Hershey, R-36-Upper Shore, on Feb. 11 requesting that "A Local Courtesy" legislation be introduced. "The Council of Governments of Queen Anne's County unanimously supports this decision," the letter from COG President George "Smokey" Sigler states.

The COG has been looking into possible changes in the way county commissioners are elected for some time.

In a Tuesday interview, Arentz said he proposed the bill after discussing it with the COG and talking to people on his own to get some measure of the public's position before crafting his legislation.

"The Council of Governments represents a large group of people," he said, adding the straw vote is simply a way of measuring citizens' opinions about potential changes without actually voting to make either suggested change. He also believes a straw poll could help better inform people about the issues at hand.



Legislative breakfast

Del. Steve Arentz

Hershey said Tuesday he hasn't "been convinced of the compelling benefits of either proposal."

"I am hesitant that moving forward with a (straw) poll before discussing what is expected once the results are determined and without fully vetting the details to implement such actions would only end up providing more questions than answers," he said.

He added that he is concerned about the potential for low voter turnout in a primary election in a presidential voting cycle, saying that primaries can be "much more sporadic" than turnout in general elections.

"I think there is a benefit when all commissioners run together and at the same time as state elections. The citizens are more focused on the issues affecting the county and our state," Hershey said.

On the question of voting by district he said that when there were three commissioners, everyone had three votes. When it went to five commissioners, everyone had five votes, but election by district would give each citizen only two votes, one for the commissioner in their district and one for the at-large commissioner, he said.

"I have a fundamental problem with a process that takes away the voices of our citizens," Hershey said.

In an interview on Monday, Sigler said voting by district would "let the people decide."

"The opinions of District 2 or District 1 perhaps might vary enormously on what the people in District 4 might think," Howell said, citing one reason why he believes commissioners should be elected by district. He said he has been getting a lot of feedback in the community about the proposed changes in commissioner election process.

"The voters I talked to, particularly the ones who have an interest in government ... I have not had one person tell me that they don't think this is a good idea. Most people support it," Howell told the COG. The only concern he said he heard was from some people who thought staggered elections might be costly.

As envisioned by the COG in previous meetings, several commissioners could be elected in a presidential election year and others in the gubernatorial election year.

"They are actually the key at this point in the process," Church Hill Town Commissioner Ed Raffetto said of the county's legislators in Annapolis.

Arentz's bill requests that two questions be placed on the ballot in November:

"Do you favor changing the method of selection of the members of the Queen Anne's County Board of County Commissioners from the current method of four members being elected at large by the voters of Queen Anne's County, with one member residing in each of the four election districts (except for the election of one member who may reside in any district of the County), to a method

where each member is elected by only the voters of the district in which the member resides (except for the election of one member who may reside in any district of the County)?”

The second question asks, “Do you favor staggering the terms of the members of the Queen Anne’s County Board of County Commissioners?”

Sigler asked COG members to contact their constituents and “advise them to give their county commissioner a call and voice their opinion on this straw poll. That’s the first thing we have to get done.”

Public discussion has already begun on “2016 QAC Open Forum” on Facebook, which Sigler says has gotten lots of hits since the COG’s letter to the lawmakers was posted.

“I’m pleased people are taking notice and I’m pleased about the bill,” he said.

Representatives of the League of Women Voters of Queen Anne’s County who attended the COG meeting said they’re interested in how commissioners are elected and offered to help bring the discussion before more county voters.

“What we would like to do ... is to offer a forum to the citizens of the county, which would give both sides of the story. We’re not coming out for or against it, we just want to have a venue for letting people come and ask questions and find out what it’s all about, because frankly a lot of people don’t know,” said League representative Barbara Sharkey.

She suggested the possibility of holding a forum sometime in the summer. COG members indicated they welcome the idea.

A hearing on Arentz’s bill is scheduled at 1 p.m. March 9 before the House Ways and Means Committee at the State House.