

Single Member Districts
By Commissioner Ray Judah

April 30, 2010

At our public hearing on May 11, 2010, the Lee County Commission will decide if single member district election of County Commissioners should move forward to a referendum in the November, 2010 General Election.

In 2008 the Charter Review Committee, consisting of fifteen well informed and active community volunteers, thoroughly vetted the merits of a single member district election format, but did not reach the required two-thirds vote of the membership to recommend that the Board of County Commissioners place the issue on the ballot.

One issue that the Charter Review Committee recommended and was moved to referendum by the Board of County Commissioners was to change the Charter Review Committee to a Charter Review Commission with broader authority than the Committee. The Charter Review Commission was approved by the voters and will take effect in 2016.

The Charter Review Commission will have the opportunity to move recommended action on issues to the Board of County Commissioners by a 3/5 vote and bypass the Board of County Commissioners with a 4/5 vote for issues to be placed directly on the ballot. Our Charter form of government also provides for 7% of the registered voters to petition for a Charter Amendment to move forward to referendum.

A third alternative to placing a Charter Amendment on the ballot is a direct request of the Board of County Commissioners. In such a scenario, as with the single member districts proposal, the Board must exercise judicious restraint on a Charter Amendment that will dramatically change the structure of county government.

The Charter Review Commission will provide the proper forum wherein which debate and public input on the appropriate representative form of government would be thoroughly evaluated. In the

alternative, the petition process would ensure sufficient public interest and concern to elevate the issue of single member districts for consideration by the voters at large.

Single member districts undermine our representative form of government and would be divisive and create fiefdoms.

Our current at large election process allows registered voters to vote for all five County Commissioners. Single member districts limits voter choice to one County Commission seat.

Under single member districts, County Commissioners would no longer remain accountable to the voters at large since voters' influence would be restricted by district. It is highly questionable whether individual districts would offer a specific geographical area of our community, party affiliation, or ethnic minority to have greater representation on the Board of County Commissioners.

An individual candidate for the Lee County Board of Commissioners may well be supported by the majority of the voters in a particular district, but it requires a majority of the Board to approve a level of service and/or public works projects such as roads or parks, in our community.

Absent an election at large format, the focus on community wide public interest gives way to parochialism. Each County Commissioner should be accountable to the voters at large to ensure balance and stability in representing the whole community.