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'Instant runoff' gets a tryout

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RALEIGH — Hendersonville and Cary will become laboratories for a new system of voting in North Carolina that gets rid of poorly attended runoff elections.

On Nov. 6 voters in Hendersonville will pick their two favorite candidates for two City Council seats, as usual.

But they'll also be able to rank the remaining three candidates in order of preference so they can be considered if one or both of their first choices lose.

"More people have a say in choosing the winner," said Bob Hall, executive director of the election reform group Democracy North Carolina.

The city will save about \$10,000 by eliminating the need for a runoff election, Mayor Greg Newman said. City Council approved the system Thursday.

The General Assembly in 2006 agreed to let up to 10 cities and towns this year and 10 counties next year become pilot projects for instant runoff voting.

This year the state found just two communities with both the desire to serve as experiments and enough candidates to qualify.

Chance to lead way

"They could be making history with how we do elections in the future in North Carolina," State Board of Elections Executive Director Gary Bartlett said.

Voter turnout for runoff elections is usually in the single digits, Bartlett said.

The alternative being tried in North Carolina has been used in cities like San Francisco. Supporters say it saves voters from having to go to the polls twice and candidates from having to decide whether to spend all their money or hold some of it back in case of a runoff.

It also could encourage civility, Hall said, by making candidates wary of alienating their rivals' supporters for fear of losing a spot on their backup ballots.

But the ballot is different than voters are used to.

"I think people will get very confused," said state Rep. Carolyn Justus, R-Hendersonville, who opposed

the instant runoff plan in the legislature.

Elections officials in Henderson County will tally up people's first choices for council members.

If two candidates don't emerge with a majority of votes, Bartlett said, the counters would include backup choices in a "runoff" between the top candidates.

In Cary, the mayor's job and three seats on the Town Council are up for grabs Oct. 9.

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