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Instant-runoff voting mulled

Complicated or convenient? Wake voters weigh in at public hearing

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CARY - Depending on which speaker you believed Thursday, instant-runoff voting is either a boon to the democratic process or a confusing system that infringes on the rights of voters.

Those were some of the opinions expressed at a public hearing held by the Wake County Board of Elections at Cary's Town Hall. The hearing came more than three months after Cary voters became the first in the state to try a test program that could have wide implications on how North Carolinians vote in the future.

On the Oct. 9 ballot, Cary voters were asked to name a first, second and third choice for Town Council in their district. If the first-place finisher in a three-way race failed to win a 50 percent plurality, the instant-runoff voting process was used to decide the winner.

That scenario occurred in Cary's District B race, where Don Frantz ended up defeating Vickie Maxwell.

Maxwell was among those who spoke at Thursday's public hearing. She said instant-runoff voting made campaigning difficult because she had to spend time explaining the system to voters and asking nonsupporters to choose her as the second-best candidate.

"It's kind of hard to sell yourself second," she said.

Other opponents of the voting process said it was complicated. They complained that the results had to be counted by hand because software currently does not exist for scanning the runoff ballots.

"Instant-runoff voting is not as easy as 1-2-3," said Janice Sears, a Knightdale resident. "It's complicated and confusing."

Supporters of instant-runoff voting, which is used in cities such as San Francisco and Burlington, Vt., argued that most Cary voters understood the process. They said it saves money and increases voter participation by eliminating the need for a follow-up election, for which turnout is usually very low.

"Instant-runoff voting just makes sense," Cary voter Marilyn Miller said.

The Wake County Board of Elections will accept written comments from residents until 5 p.m. Tuesday. The board will then turn over all comments to the State Board of Elections, which will issue a report on instant-runoff voting to the General Assembly.

Instant-runoff voting could be adopted statewide if the test program is deemed a success. When the General Assembly approved the program last year, it allowed for up to 10 cities in 2007 and 10 counties in 2008 to participate.

Cary and the Western North Carolina town of Hendersonville are the only two places in the state

that have held elections with instant-runoff voting.

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