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County residents petition for new charter-writing board

Group calls for special election to replace nine-member committee

by Sherry Greenfield | Staff Writer

A group of residents is petitioning to replace the nine people and three alternates selected by the Frederick Board of County Commissioners on March 10 to draw up a plan to change the county's form of government.

The residents unhappy with the commissioners' picks announced Friday they are circulating a petition calling for a special election to overturn the decision and elect eight people for the Frederick County Charter Board.

Board members are charged with writing a charter detailing how charter government would run in Frederick County.

The petition's candidates are Ellis C. Burruss, Rolan O. Clark, Paul J. Gilligan, Donna S. Kuzemchek, Daniel P. Laxton, John B. McClurkin, Aaron A. Valentino and Russell N. Winch.

"We were talking amongst ourselves about how the process worked and what we wanted to do," Burruss said. "This is more of a process issue. This is a very important issue, and I'd like to see a more open process."

Winch, a Walkersville commissioner, said like others behind the petition drive that he was unhappy with the selection process. "I have concerns on several levels," he said. "Rather than allowing the citizens the ability to choose the folks, they [commissioners] do."

Frederick County Commissioners' President Blaine R. Young (R) said he stands by their selection, and is not surprised by the petition drive. "I'd heard rumors about it," he said. "It's their right to do that."

The Frederick Board of County Commissioners appointed Fred Anderson, Joan Aquilino, Debra Borden, Tom Browning, Ken Coffey, Jeff Holtzinger, James Hoover, Bob Kresslein, and Rocky Mackintosh.

The three alternates are Doug Browning, Dana French and Earl Robbins.

In February, commissioners received 52 resumes from residents wanting to serve on the committee.

Burruss, McClurkin and Winch were among the 52 candidates that submitted resumes but were not selected for interviews. Clark, Gilligan, Kuzemchek, Laxton and Valentino did not submit resumes.

Commissioners narrowed down the list of applicants to be interviewed to 15.

Gilligan said he didn't apply for the board because he felt he would have no chance of being picked. He is a well-known Democrat, and the commissioners are all Republicans, he said.

"I'm a known entity," said Gilligan, the former mayor of Burkittsville. "There was not a high probability I would be picked."

Gilligan said Burruss convinced him to run as a candidate on the petition.

Since Friday's announcement, there has been speculation that former Frederick County Commissioner Kai J. Hagen (D) and Janice Wiles (D), a former candidate for commissioner and director of Friends of Frederick County, a land-preservation group, are behind the petition drive.

Both contend they are not.

"I'm offering moral support," Hagen said. "A lot of people were asked. Some people said yes and some people said no. There were a lot of people that exchanged a lot of emails. It was not like one person was the leader in this."

"Personally, I support it," Wiles said. "But Friends of Frederick County have taken no position on this and didn't encourage the petitions."

Finally, Hagen said as people work to collect the 2,000 signatures needed to hold a special election, residents will now have the time to learn more about a charter form of government.

"I'm absolutely convinced that even if we go through an election and it didn't change the outcome, this is still a worthwhile effort," he said.

It's an effort that will cost Frederick County taxpayers a minimum of \$150,000, said Stuart Harvey, director of the county's Board of Elections.

"That does not factor in staff time and overtime," he said. "You factor that in and it could be substantially more."

Harvey said polling places have to be rented and election judges hired, which will also hike the price up.

In the meantime, the deadline for residents to have the petition turned into the county is May 9. "The petition is turned into commissioners and they send it to us," Harvey said.

The Board of Elections will verify the petitions, with a special election taking place 30 to 90 days later. "You're looking at an election in the summer," Harvey said. "The county commissioners have to pass a resolution to set the election date. We will make a recommendation and they will set the date."

All members appointed by commissioners and the new candidates on the petition will appear on the ballot. The top vote-getters in the special election would make up the charter-writing board.

The three alternates picked by commissioners March 10, will not appear on the ballot. They are Doug Browning, Dana French and Earl Robbins.

Petitions can be obtained by sending an email to FredCoCharterPetition@gmail.com.

In the meantime, the first meeting of the charter-writing committee appointed by commissioners is set for 7 p.m. March 30, in the first-floor hearing room of Winchester Hall, 12 E. Church St., Frederick. The meeting is open to the public.

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