

Opinion:

## **Eighteen important words**

Originally published August 27, 2012

The deceptively simple-sounding language of the question belies the complexity of the answer: "Do you approve the adoption of the Charter of Frederick County proposed by the Frederick County Charter Board?"

It's been more than two decades since Frederick County put a similar question in front of voters. Enough has changed since then to make it virtually unpredictable how the electorate will respond. Well, almost unpredictable -- you have a straight 50-50 shot at yes or no. What's impossible to gauge is the degree of support or opposition on either side of the issue.

Those 18 words, starting "Do you approve," will be among seven other statewide referendum questions on the Nov. 6 ballot, and while those other questions are important, none will have quite the effect on Frederick County as passing charter rule.

Voters could define a totally new course for Frederick County with a new direction and new leadership, more freedom from the state Legislature, and more power for the county to determine the county's direction.

We've been in favor of that change for a while now. As the county has grown, so has the complexity of running it. Charter government, with its executive and legislative branches, will allow for better management than a co-equal board of five people.

We hold out hope that at least some of the people who put their check mark next to the question will have read the charter document created over the past 17 months by the nine-member charter-writing committee.

On this issue, we'd rather do too much educating than too little, so here are the basics:

- A county executive paid \$95,000 a year who, among his or her powers, creates and submits to the council an annual budget.
- A seven-person county council. Five members will be elected from council districts, numbered one through five. Two members will be elected "at large," that is, they will represent the whole county.
- Council member terms are four years, and members are limited to no more than three consecutive terms in office.
- Each council member will be paid \$22,500 a year.

- The council can introduce and enact legislation. The county executive can veto it. The council can override that veto with a five-member supermajority vote.

Most importantly, what the prospect of charter government promises is more autonomy from the state.

Under our current form of government, commissioners wishing to enact certain pieces of legislation must submit them to a multi-layered web of approval. First comes the eight-member delegation -- two senators and six delegates -- who whittle through the list. What remains is submitted to either the House or Senate as a delegation bill. Controversial bills sometimes run afoul of various political blocs -- either other counties or caucuses. Finally, the measure has to be signed into law by the governor.

Fortunately, you'll have the opportunity to learn about this important measure. A Charter Education Coalition has formed to give voters all the information they need about charter rule. We'd also urge you to attend a forum on charter government held by the Sugarloaf Conservancy, 7 p.m. Oct. 3 at the Urbana Fire Hall.

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