

City of Alexandria, Virginia

MEMORANDUM

DATE: APRIL 11, 2008

TO: THE HONORABLE MAYOR AND MEMBERS OF CITY COUNCIL

FROM: JAMES K. HARTMANN, CITY MANAGER

SUBJECT: BUDGET MEMO # 85: VOTER TURNOUT AND OUTREACH PROGRAMS

This memorandum is in response to Councilman Gaines question:

Costs associated with increasing voter outreach, registration and education efforts to positively impact voter participation in LOCAL elections. I am interested in increasing turnout among all voters, in particular outreach to traditionally low voting populations (younger and minority voters). What are we doing and what resources are required to fashion a voter outreach program (partnering where appropriate with local groups) designed to appreciably increase voter turnout AND voter education opportunities.

The Office of the Registrar has prepared the following response:

Increasing voter participation is clearly a noble and lofty goal and the Office of the Registrar is prepared to facilitate efforts by the City as done for political parties and community groups that engage in such efforts.

Current Voter Registration Outreach Activities

It is a primary objective of the Office of the Registrar to make voter registration accessible to every eligible citizen in the City and access to voter registration has never been easier than it is at this point in our local history. In Alexandria, 88% of eligible voters are registered to vote. Nationally, 70% of the population is registered to vote.

The Office of the Registrar maintains ongoing voter registration outreach activities, some of which are mandated by federal law. Under the National Voter Registration Act of 1994, voters are entitled to register to vote by mail, or register when doing business at the Virginia Department of Motor Vehicles (DMV) and other specified government agencies.

The General Registrar assigns an Assistant Registrar to maintain an office at the Alexandria DMV to assure that applications are complete and acceptable when submitted. Registration applications can be mailed to citizens upon request. In addition, applications can be obtained at libraries, recreation centers, and post offices. The Office staff works with adult care facilities to ensure that residents are registered to vote.

Staff also registers new citizens in monthly ceremonies at the federal courthouse in Alexandria and at other similar ceremonies conducted in the City.

The Office conducted registration outreach at T.C. Williams and private high schools in Alexandria prior to the presidential primary and will do so again at regular intervals. The Office also facilitates the voter registration drives of political parties, non-governmental organizations, community groups, and at festivals and events by providing materials and by training the volunteers who conduct these drives.

The Office reaches out to voters who the U.S. Post Office indicates that they may have moved by contacting them to confirm or change their addresses.

In addition, the Office staff advises citizens of voter registration opportunities and deadlines by way of official newspaper publications, news releases, the City's FYI publication, and through the City's web site.

Current Voter Information Outreach Activities

In addition to the voter registration access, another primary objective of the Office is to make voting as accessible as possible to every eligible Alexandria citizen. To that end, the Office maintains ongoing voter information outreach activities designed to inform voters of when, where, and how to vote. This is done through the mail, in official publications, by news release, in the City's FYI, and on the City's web site.

At the time of entry into the voter list, staff sends the following material to each voter by first class mail:

- A voter registration card, which includes the voter's polling place name and address and legislative and school districts.
- An election schedule for this and upcoming years.
- Contact information for the Office including web address.
- An invitation to apply to be a precinct election officer.

In the summer prior to each Presidential Election, staff mails each voter the above information and additional information as needed. In 2000, staff enclosed information on the newly enacted I.D. requirements. In 2004, staff included a brochure on how to use the new voting system. On those occasions when a referendum or constitutional amendment question is on the ballot, staff includes in the mailings to eligible citizens, the basic voter registration information designed by the State Board of Elections and drafted by the Attorney General.

In addition to mailings, the Office runs official notices in the Washington Post and Alexandria Gazette Packet prior to each election, including basic election information and absentee voting opportunities. Staff also responds to media requests for information that facilitate voter knowledge.

The City's web site contains an extensive election information on a broad range of voting issues including election calendars, voting locations, election districts and maps, absentee voting, how to use the voting system, campaign finance disclosures, upcoming election information and provides links to other web sites that have useful election information.

In addition to mailings and other published information, the Office staff answers thousands of phone calls and emails from area voters on voting related inquiries, including voter registration applications, absentee voting and printed election information.

Partnering with Local Groups

The Office regularly partners with local community organizations to better inform voters. In 2004, staff worked with the local political parties, the League of Women Voters, the Alexandria Commission on Persons with Disabilities, civic associations, service organizations, and religious organizations to educate voters in the use of eSlate, the City's new voting system. Fifteen thousand Alexandrians benefited from hands-on demonstrations. The Office continues to work with many of the abovementioned organizations to inform, educate, and register voters.

Proposals that may Increase Local Election Participation

Members of Council, Electoral Board Members, and staff have informally discussed the idea of implementing a voter information mailing prior to local elections similar to the one that precedes presidential elections. The State Board of Elections would be consulted for approval of the mailing, including its content. The estimated cost of such a mailing would be \$55,000. This would likely increase turnout at least marginally but there is no assurance that such a mailing would increase turnout significantly.

With respect to local elections, the most cost effective measure that can be taken to increase participation is to combine local elections with higher turnout elections such as federal or gubernatorial elections. This step actually cuts costs by an estimated \$60,000 in local election years, and as statistics from surrounding jurisdictions indicate, substantially increases turnout. Of course, this is a local policy question where more than turnout is legitimately considered. The Office is prepared to administer the City's elections on any statutorily permitted date and has no position on what that date might be.

Factors that Increase Turnout Generally

There are actions that can be taken that assuredly increase participation but are not within the powers of local governments. Election participation increases at every level when one or a combination of several statutory and political factors come into play.

First, effective political candidates, organizations, and competitive races increase turnout. A competitive race with diverse candidates has resulted in record presidential primary turnouts across the nation including Virginia. Reports indicate that turnout is up in all demographic groups including minorities and young people.

Secondly, "hot button" issues also can increase turnouts at elections. Higher turnout sometimes correlates to constituent dissatisfaction. A colleague once said to the General Registrar, "If you want to increase turnout in local elections, don't pick up the trash."

Finally, there is a great deal of evidence indicating that certain laws (not enacted in Virginia) result in higher rates of voter participation.

Briefly they are:

In U.S. States:

- Election Day registration
- Vote by mail
- Automatic restoration of rights of felons after release from court supervision.

Other democracies:

- Fines for not voting
- Sunday elections
- Passive voter registration systems where the voter list is tied to a national or state registry. Voters are added to the voter list automatically at the age of majority.

Legislators must balance the goal of higher voter participation against other perceived negative consequences. These proposals tend to be contentious and often split along strict party lines. The Office neither supports nor opposes such legislation. Staff provides policy makers with their best estimates regarding all the potential consequences and costs of these proposals while maintaining partisan neutrality.

Conclusion

The Office makes a reasonable and cost effective effort to bring vital information on voter registration and voting to the community. Some are mandated by statute, many are not. With the exception of local elections, Alexandria voter participation when compared to other neighboring jurisdictions is above the national average.

Ultimately, the goal of the Office is to create an electoral environment where access to registration and voting is completely and easily open to every eligible citizen in Alexandria.

The role of election officials is to act in such a way as to foster faith in the electoral process and the City must consider how our actions will be perceived by legitimate electoral stakeholders and voters. Election officials who participate in activities historically reserved for the political parties and voter advocates such as targeting registration or turnout do so at their peril and at the peril of voter faith in the electoral system.

cc: Alexandria Electoral Board