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NAACP: 'Complicated' primary ballot discriminatory

By Graham Moomaw



The head of the Albemarle-Charlottesville NAACP said Thursday that the voting process for the city's upcoming Democratic primary is so complicated it's unfair, adding that one elderly resident has compared the process to the "dreaded poll tax."

"The NAACP is concerned that complicated instructions and an unfamiliar ballot layout makes voting difficult for elderly voters, disabled and visually impaired voters, new voters and voters with limited education," local NAACP president M. Rick Turner said at a news conference at Burley Middle School. "A group of disabled citizens have voiced the most urgent concern that the current process is unfair and intimidating."

Poll taxes, required voting fees commonly associated with Jim Crow laws and the disenfranchisement of black voters, were abolished in 1964 by the 24th Amendment to the U.S. Constitution.

A sample ballot provided by the Democratic Party asks voters to rank candidates according their preference by circling numbers in a column next to the names. Voters are allowed to rank as many people as they wish, choosing just one candidate or ranking the entire field.

Seven Democrats — Satyendra Huja, James Halfaday, Kathy Galvin, Paul Beyer, Dede Smith, Brevy Cannon and Colette Blount — will compete Saturday for their party's nomination to the City Council. Voters will also choose one nominee for Clerk of Charlottesville Circuit Court from a field of three candidates, incumbent Paul C. Garrett, Llezelle Dugger and Pam Melampy. The primary — which is open to registered city voters willing to sign a Democratic declaration form — will be held from 9 a.m. to 7 p.m. Saturday at Burley.

Turner said the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People is urging all eligible voters to go out and vote, in spite of the perceived difficulties with the ballot. Turner said the key to a successful experience is to ask questions before voting.

“Please don't rob yourself of this opportunity to vote,” Turner said. “The African-American vote, as we all know, has been particularly low during primary elections. So the NAACP is strongly encouraging all citizens, and particularly African-American citizens, to turn out in high numbers and participate in this important part of the political process.”

Democratic Party co-chair Jim Nix was on hand for the NAACP event and responded to Turner's remarks. When voters are confused by the ballot it's of “great concern” to the party, Nix said, but organizers have taken a number of steps to ensure participants will have all the help they need to cast their vote.

“This is only the second time we've held a firehouse primary, or an unassembled caucus, to select our nominees,” Nix said. “It was first done in 2009 and we had a huge turnout. People were very pleased that we were picking our nominees in a more democratic fashion with much wider participation by minority voters as well as the rest of the community.”

Nix said the ballot being used this year is identical to the one used in 2009, with the exceptions that there are three council positions open this year instead of two, and a bigger field of candidates competing for them.

Trained personnel will be available to explain the ballot, instructions will be available on every table and if voters believe they have made a mistake on their ballot, they'll be able to discard it and start over, Nix said.

“We want people to make sure that they're comfortable with the process and that they're satisfied when they're finished that they've done it properly,” Nix said.

A sample ballot provided by Nix lists the seven council candidates and three clerk candidates, with instructions to rank their choices by circling the numbers in adjacent columns.

“Duplicate rankings or the use of X’s, or check marks to indicate your choice of a candidate will not be read as indications of preferences and will cause your ballot to be disregarded. Do not skip numbers in the ranking sequence,” read the accompanying instructions.

Alicia B. Lugo, 69, said she’s been a lifelong, politically aware resident of Charlottesville, with several years of experience on the city’s electoral board, but has never seen such a “travesty” of a ballot.

“Genius is not in how complicated you make something,” Lugo said. “Genius is in how well it’s understood by the most people. Whoever made this up was no genius.”

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