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Edison opponents wrestling over wards

Proposal would alter the makeup of local government

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The political flier being circulated at Edison's Indian festival in August included an ominous warning -- "Don't turn Edison into a Newark or Camden!" -- while urging voters to oppose a township referendum to create a ward system of government.

Wards would bring corruption, more taxes, and community division, according to the flier financed by an election account for the Democratic council candidates backed by Mayor Jun Choi.

"It's scare tactics," said Anthony Russomanno, who has organized a group in support of creating wards in the township. "This weakens the party bosses, and it puts power in neighborhood hands."

Russomanno, who ran unsuccessfully against Choi's hand-picked council slate in the Democratic primary, said wards would create more accountability for council members and make it easier for residents to voice concerns through their local leaders.

The ward debate will be put to the voters in November with a pair of ballot questions that would expand the council from seven to nine members and create five township wards. Each ward would elect a representative to the nine-member council and four seats would be elected by the voters at large.

Both ballot questions must pass for the change to take effect. If either question fails, the ward system with an expanded council would be defeated.

Edison voters rejected a similar proposal four years ago by the razor-thin margin of 29 votes. Choi campaigned against the ward system at the time and has renewed his opposition to the latest effort to create wards.

"It is not good for Edison," Choi said. "This is a serious question that will have long-term impact on our community."

Choi said the change would cause a long transition period as government changes, increase costs to taxpayers and create the potential for special elections and divisive politics.

There are varied opinions on the effectiveness of a ward system of government, said Ernest Reock, professor emeritus of the Center for Government Services at Rutgers University.

But there are key steps that would happen if Edison voters approve the change. A commission would start work to decide how to divide the municipality within five days of the vote, and would be required to finish within 90 days, said Robert H. Levin, chief of the local government section in the Office of Legislative Services.

The commission would be made up of the members of the Middlesex County Board of Elections and the township clerk. All terms for current council members would end next year, including those elected this November.

All nine seats on the newly reformed council would be up for election in 2008, with the four at-large seats up for four-year terms and the five ward council seats up for two-year terms. In 2010, the ward seats would become four-year terms to offset those elections from the at-large seats.

In the midst of the political transition, Choi's mayoral term would expire in 2009.

"Some people will be happy, some will be unhappy," Reock said.

The campaign literature released by the council candidates backed by Choi estimated the costs of transition to wards with a nine-member council at \$250,000.

"That's grossly exaggerated," Reock said. "If the commission is able, it shouldn't cost more than \$1,000."

Township Republicans have backed the wards proposal. And some Democrats on the council previously opposed to wards have voiced support after a bruising loss to Choi's slate of political newcomers in the party primary in June.

Angelo Orlando, chairman of "No Wards" and president of the Edison Arts Society, said he is concerned that some view the creation of wards as an end run that would give those who recently lost council races an earlier chance to challenge for council seats before terms expire.

"Some who wanted to run for council and lost look at this as an easier way to get elected," he said.

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