

# HOME NEWS TRIBUNE

## Edison will vote on ward system

Home News Tribune Online 10/8/07

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EDISON — Come November, voters in Edison will once again be asked to choose their form of government.

The council has offered a pair of referendum questions on this November's ballot that, if passed, would ostensibly change the form of government Edison has had since 1954.

Up for consideration is the ward system, which would break the township down into five districts or wards, each with its own representative on the council. The remainder of the nine-person council would be made up of four at-large members who would be elected by the entire township as the council is now. The ward system is used in such large municipalities as Woodbridge, Newark and Camden and its supporters feel Edison has become too large not to have it.

"When we came to Edison in 1961 there were 28,000 people," said council member Antonia Ricigliano, a supporter of the wards and one of the principal supporters of the referendum question that failed four years ago. "Now we have more than 100,000."

Ricigliano said the township has become too large for there not to be a ward style of government. She said parts of the township are currently under-represented, and she supports a change in government that would put systematic checks on how the township's residents are represented.

"Residents would be better represented by having ward councilmen serving in their wards," she said.

The second question would increase the number of council members from seven to nine. Thanks to a resolution passed by the council on Sept. 26 if it were to pass, the total amount budgeted for council salaries would remain at \$42,500 for all nine members to share.

The ward system allows for smaller groups of people to choose their representative, the thinking being that the closer the representative is to that community, the better that person will represent it.

If the plan is approved, Edison would be divided into five wards, each consisting of roughly 20,000 constituents.

Edison Mayor Jun Choi has long been an opponent of the ward system and spoke out against it as a resident when it was on the ballot in November 2003. At that time, the wards question failed by a slim margin and — due to a four-year, state-imposed moratorium — it could not be put on the ballot until this year.

"Personally, I oppose the wards because it will lead to higher taxes and a divided community," Choi said Tuesday. "But I respect the will of the voters of Edison."

Anthony Russomanno, a longtime supporter of the wards, has started a political-action committee called Neighborhoods First to campaign for the passage of the ward system.

He said that the ward system would allow for better accountability and representation.

"To represent everybody is to represent nobody," Russomanno said, "because no one is held accountable."

However, Russomanno said that wards have a way of breaking down the political machine, something he said has been a problem in Edison in the past.

"That's one of the reasons I am for it," Russomanno said.

Wayne Mascola, one of four members of Choi's slate of council candidates who swept the June Democratic primary, said that he and his campaign are against the ward system and that implementing the system would cost taxpayers nearly \$500,000. Mascola's campaign, which also consists of council candidates Dr. Sudhanshu Prasad, AnnMarie Griffin-Ussak and Melissa Perilstein, issued a press release paid for by the campaign that described their objections to the ward system and urged voters to reject the referendum question.

Mascola said implementing the system would require two possible special elections at cost to the township as well as various professional services such as demographers, consultants and lawyers.

"That's going to be some bucks," Mascola said.

Mascola also worries about the possibility of back-room deals pushing up the cost of government when representatives are voted in by specific wards and are expected to bring home pork projects to those wards.

He suggested a different way of getting better local representation using the system already in place.

"The real nuts and bolts of it is we have 78 voting districts," Mascola said. "Let them be down in the trenches and give them more access to the council to bring the problems forward."

Otherwise, Mascola worries the cost of government will rise due to pet projects in each ward. "It's going to be a tit for tat, and it's going to cost us money," Mascola said.