

# HOME NEWS TRIBUNE

## Be Counted

### Pros, cons of ward system open to debate in Edison

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On Nov. 6, Edison voters will consider two ballot questions: They must decide whether or not to continue the present form of government or switch to a ward system and they will be asked to increase the Township Council members from seven to nine. Both of these questions must pass in order to change the form of government. There is a considerable amount of controversy about the ward system.

The ward system would divide the township into five districts or wards with each ward having its own representative on the council. Four additional council members would be elected by the entire township.

The ward system is used in large towns such as Paterson, Woodbridge, Old Bridge, Camden and Newark. Advocates for the ward system claim that Edison is too large for its current form of government. Under the ward system, there would be smaller groups of people choosing ward representatives on the council. The ward representatives on the council supposedly would be familiar with and closer to their respective communities because they live there. As a result, the community has better representation than the current system of government.

Antonia Ricigliano, a current council member who supports the ward system, said in a Home News Tribune report that there are parts of the township that are underrepresented. She said residents would be better served by having ward council members. The ward system seems to improve accountability, because a ward representative on the council is held accountable to the people in his or her ward.

Under the current system of government, it is the council as a body that is held accountable. As a consequence, there is a risk that the current system of government could create a political machine by the lack of accountability. The ward system could apparently break down a political machine, because there is a small group of voters that serves as a watchdog over the ward representative.

The ward system can weaken party bosses because the power is placed in neighborhoods.

Edison is one large town. The ward system, by definition, divides the town so that, while residents are aware of and concerned about the needs and happenings in their individual wards, they might not know or care about what is going on in other parts of town. There is a risk of competition between the wards, and the formation of political-support coalitions among wards. A successful ward system requires the cooperation and working together of all the wards.

It appears that those who are opposed to the ward system, Wayne Mascola, Dr. Sudhanshu Prasad, AnnMarie Griffin-Ussak and Melissa Perilstein, members of the Mayor Jun Choi-backed council slate who won the Democratic primary in June, apparently have not attended council meetings or provided input in Edison government affairs until the primary election. Therefore, their familiarity with how Edison government is run and their knowledge of a ward system relevant to Edison is questionable.

The mayor, who is opposed to the ward system, has stated in the Home News Tribune: "Personally, I oppose the wards because it will lead to higher taxes and a divided community." He did not provide evidence of how the ward system would divide the community or the specific reasoning for higher taxes. Mascola has said in a press report that the implementation of the ward system would cost \$500,000 but did not provide a rationale for his statement.

It has been reported that a press release by the campaign of the Choi-backed council candidates estimated that the transition cost for a ward system with a nine-member council would be \$250,000. Ernest Reock, professor emeritus of the Center for Government Services at Rutgers University, said that the campaign literature was exaggerated and the transition should not cost more than \$1,000.

A public debate with those in favor and those opposed to the ward system should be held so that voters could be in a better position to decide what form of government they want. A large voter turnout is essential to decisively determine whether or not Edison will have a ward system of government. Do the benefits of the ward system outweigh the advantages of the current one? Let the voters decide.

"Be Counted" columnist Louise Riscalla, Ph.D., is a resident of Edison. "Be Counted" columnists are members of the public. Their opinions are not those of the Home News Tribune.