

Aspen mulls vote-counting options

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ASPEN – City attorneys are drafting language for a November ballot item that could replace the controversial voting method known as instant runoff voting for Aspen's May election.

Two potential alternatives could appear on the ballot: a winner-takes-all model that would eliminate runoffs, and what City Council is calling a “compromise” that would reduce the current majority threshold from 50 percent of the vote plus one vote to 40 percent of the vote plus one.

The second is meant to reduce the likelihood of a runoff, which IRV eliminated by giving voters a chance to rank every candidate on the ballot. If there was not a majority, the votes for the candidate in the last place were eliminated and those ballots were moved to the piles of the candidate ranked second by the respective voters.

Councilman Dwayne Romero lobbied for the winner-takes-all ballot in Tuesday's council work session. He said that method most closely represents the original intent of Aspen's adoption of IRV in November 2007: To make elections more efficient financially, as well as logistically.

But Councilman Torre and Mayor Mick Ireland indicated that the compromise method might be the best way to go, saying the winner-takes-all method could reduce voter confidence.

“When it comes to voting, I'm not looking for the easiest route,” Torre said. “I'm looking for the most effective.”

Ireland said the winner-takes-all method could disenfranchise voters because fringe candidates could win the election.

Marilyn Marks is a local activist who sued the city late last year because it wouldn't release the ballots from the May 2009 IRV election, citing constitutional rules that prohibit it from doing so. She asked for transparency and a full public process in the final approval of the ballot language.

Ireland promised that the measure would go through the regular public hearing process – “again and again,” Torre confirmed.

The council indicated to voters earlier this year that it would bring a new voting option to the table after the last election was mired in controversy, partially over IRV, which has gained increasing scrutiny in communities across the country. Citing complex mathematical equations, election integrity enthusiasts and mathematicians have criticized the method.

Romero expressed a desire to move on from the controversy in the meeting.

“We're just gonna go down a rabbit hole,” Romero said. “I've already been there. I don't want to go there again.”

Several other methods were up for consideration by the council, including reverting to the traditional June runoff election that Aspen held before voters adopted IRV.