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Burlington IRV repeal picks up momentum

By John Briggs, Free Press Staff Writer

The controversy over Burlington Telecom finances has energized the effort to repeal instant run-off voting, say those involved in the petition drive to put the issue on the city ballot in March.

"No question," said Dave Hartnett, a New North End Democrat and Parks and Recreation Department commissioner. "It clearly has picked up momentum. There are just more people contacting us throughout the city asking for petitions they could sign or take out."

The petition drive by the group "One Person, One Vote" began shortly after Mayor Bob Kiss was re-elected in March. He won first-place votes from just 29 percent of voters and trailed Republican Kurt Wright by 313 votes after the second IRV round.

In the third round, after Democrat Andy Montroll was mathematically eliminated, Kiss gained a plurality of third-place votes and defeated Wright. The voting data also showed that Montroll, with 4,683 votes, received more first- or second-place votes than either Kiss (3,969) or Wright (3,936).

IRV was approved by voters in 2005 and subsequently by the state Legislature. It was used in Burlington mayoral elections in 2006 and 2009. The previous system called for a run-off election between the top two candidates if neither received 40 percent of the vote.

"A lot of people think the mayor's race was invalid, that we have an invalid mayor," Hartnett said. "I'm not ready to say that, but for those who think that, Burlington Telecom has added fuel to the fire."

Democrat Sandy Baird has supported the Kiss administration's handling of the Burlington Telecom issue but has been involved in the effort to repeal IRV. "Many people think IRV tends to select a person who doesn't represent the choice of the first-place votes," she said. "That's really what people are upset about."

Baird said the Burlington Telecom issue has energized the IRV petition drive, though in her view "energy began to build before the BT situation. It's a good opportunity to revisit it, because there's so much feeling about it since the last election."

Wright, who was City Council president when he lost to Kiss, said the petition drive has gathered about 1,200 of the 1,600 signatures needed to put the issue on the March ballot. "I'm going to call everyone with a petition sheet in the next day or two and encourage them to finish up in the next couple of weeks," he said. "Then we'll set up a meeting and see if we've passed the magic 1,600 mark. The signatures are undoubtedly out there."

The deadline for petitioned articles to be added to the March ballot is Jan. 22, according to the Secretary of State's Office.

"I went out last weekend in Ward 7 to get some signatures, and ... (BT) was all they wanted to talk about," said Councilor Paul Decelles, R-Ward 7. "There's an enormous amount of frustration and anger in the community. It's advantageous for us to be gathering signatures now."

Decelles said the BT issues are adding energy to the IRV petition drive because of "buyer's remorse. Seeing the second-place candidate become the mayor frustrates (voters)," he said. "Seeing this going on with BT, and the financial mess we're in adds to the anger and frustration."

"What I'm hearing," Wright said, "because BT has been such a hot topic in the news and with voters, with the mess we have in Burlington, is 'Yeah, give me that petition. We need a change.' People seem really fired up, and a lot are making the connection: 'Let's change the voting system.'"

"It's crucial to have a full debate," Wright said. "I think it will get a lot more debate and attention this time than when it was voted in in 2005, the year of the YMCA (Moran plant proposal)."

Kiss did not respond to requests for comment.

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