

Election Solutions



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MEMORANDUM

TO: Pamela Plumb, Chair and Members of the Charter Commission

FROM: Terry Bouricius, Election Solutions consultant

DATE: January 10, 2010

RE: Instant Run-off Voting Experience in Burlington, Vermont

First just a bit about who I am...My election reform consulting work for jurisdictions and non-profit organizations across the country since 1998 has included a substantial amount of work on implementing instant runoff voting. I was hired by the city of Burlington, Vermont to develop the regulations, procedures, ballot, and voter education campaign for its initial IRV election in 2006. Prior to my consulting work I was elected to five terms on the Burlington City Council, including one term as Council President, followed by five terms as member of the Vermont House of Representatives.

By all accounts (by both proponents and opponents) the 2006 and 2009 IRV mayoral elections in Burlington ran smoothly and without problems. Using the same Accu Vote OS machines as used in Portland, a simple upgrade of firmware (for a one-time license fee of \$1,000) enabled the existing voting machines to capture "ballot images" recording the rankings on every ballot. In both 2006 and 2009 more than 99.9% of votes cast in the IRV race were valid.

IRV is very popular with the voters and the scientific exit poll conducted during the first IRV election by a professor at the University of Vermont found that of those expressing an opinion 78% preferred IRV over the former election method. The most recent IRV election has sparked more controversy, as the Republican plurality leader in the initial tally (with 33% of the first choices) lost in the final tally to the incumbent Progressive mayor, after the Democratic, Green and Independent candidates were eliminated in the runoff.

The Republican candidate, Kurt Wright petitioned for a recount. After the one evening of the hand recount, with half of the city Wards recounted, Wright withdrew his petition, ending the recount early, acknowledging that the machine totals were accurate, and that he had lost.

However, many Wright supporters, and some others, focused on the fact that Wright had been ahead in the initial tally. Republican City Councilor Paul Decelles launched a petition drive to repeal IRV, and replace it with a plurality voting rule that allows a candidate to win with 40% (with a separate runoff if no candidate achieves 40%). After nine months of petitioning, he and his supporters were finally able to gather enough signatures to place the charter proposal on the ballot for this March. The League of Women Voters is organizing a campaign to retain IRV. As a rough measure of public sentiment, it should be noted that every elected Democratic, Independent and Progressive city councilor and state legislator in Burlington is opposing the proposed IRV repeal, and only two Republican city councilors and one Republican legislator are favoring the proposal. It appears almost certain that Burlington, with

its strong liberal leaning, will retain IRV.