

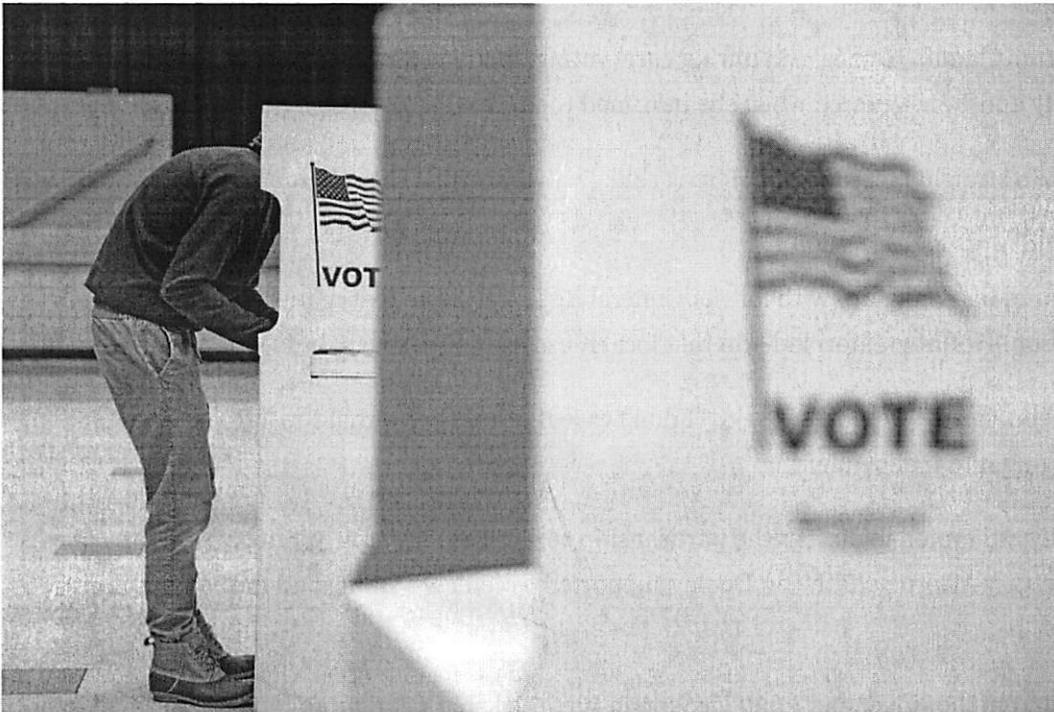
https://fredericksburg.com/news/local/move-to-fall-elections-brings-partisan-politics-in-fredericksburg-council-school-board-races/article_eec2dc2d-4a06-5345-a7a0-bef78dc6835b.html

FEATURED

SOME candidates, voters seeing red—OR blue

Move to fall elections brings partisan politics in Fredericksburg council, School Board races

Taft Coghill
Nov 2, 2021



A voter leans into the polling booth inside the polling station at Walker–Grant Middle School. Fredericksburg municipal elections were moved to November from May to meet a new state law.

TRISTAN LOREI / THE FREE LANCE-STAR

Taft Coghill

When Gov. Ralph Northam signed a bill in March to move all municipal elections in Virginia from May to November, Fredericksburg City Council members bemoaned that their campaigns would become increasingly time-consuming and divisive.

Mayor Mary Katherine Greenlaw and the majority of council lamented that the city's longstanding tradition of nonpartisan elections would be coming to an end.

Some said their partisan fears have been realized as City Council and School Board races in the four wards were on the ballot Tuesday, along with state battles for governor, lieutenant governor, attorney general and House of Delegate.

The Fredericksburg Democratic Committee handed out sample ballots endorsing City Council and School Board members at all five precincts, a major shift from May elections.

Ward 3 School Board candidate Jesus Dominguez proudly declared that he's a Republican as he voiced opposition to Critical Race Theory and mask and vaccine mandates.

Rene Rodriguez, a candidate for City Council's Ward 3 seat and former chairman of the city's Electoral Board, said this year's election is "100 percent" more partisan than in the past.

"The rhetoric is pretty bad," Rodriguez said. "On the Electoral Board, we were afraid local races would become partisan and that's exactly what happened."

Rodriguez and Ward 4 candidate Amber Peebles were informed on Oct. 16 during Saturday voting that they were campaigning too closely to the polling station and in violation of the 40-foot rule required by law.

Fredericksburg General Registrar Claudia Herzog said during early voting, many voters asked her if candidates are affiliated with a particular party and were agitated when she informed them that they run as independents.

"They come in and want to vote a straight party ticket," Herzog said. "I always direct them to the candidates' website or the candidates themselves."

Dominguez said when he declared his candidacy with former General Registrar Marc Hoffman, he put down Republican as his party affiliation. Hoffman informed him that local races are nonpartisan, but Dominguez insisted.

"I'm not ashamed of being a Republican," Dominguez said. "I don't care if people know that I'm a Republican. So I'm leaving it at that. I'm not changing it to independent."

City Council member Matt Kelly attempted to discuss the partisanship at last Tuesday's City Council meeting, but was ruled out of order by Greenlaw. City Attorney Kathleen Dooley supported Greenlaw's ruling and the conversation abruptly ended.

Nearly 13,000 voters participated in the November 2020 election in Fredericksburg and more than 7,000 voted in November 2019. The last May election in 2020 had 2,864 voters.

Candidates said in forming their opinions about the change to November, they balance the positivity of a greater turnout with the possibility of having local issues receive less attention from voters.

"I do regret that there is a greater tendency to see what really should be nonpartisan issues through a more partisan lens," said Tim Duffy, the incumbent City Council member in Ward 3. "I certainly run into that in talking to residents."

The sample ballots handed out by the Fredericksburg Democratic Committee supported Duffy and School Board incumbent Jennifer Boyd in Ward 3. In Ward 4, incumbent City Council member Chuck Frye Jr. received an endorsement from Democrats, as did Jon Gerlach in Ward 2. Gerlach is running against Dr. Andrew Reese for a seat being vacated by Billy Withers.

Matt Rowe was endorsed for the Ward 1 School Board seat over write-in challenger Margie Lucas.

Caitlin Bennett, chair of the FDC, said she was dismayed by Kelly raising the issue at the City Council meeting. She expressed concern that if the discussion was allowed to occur, it could have led to a violation of First Amendment rights to free speech.

Bennett said the endorsements weren't requested by anyone running for office, but were done in response to a Republican recruitment effort. The Fredericksburg Republican Committee did not hand out sample ballots.

Bennett said there was concern from the FDC that some candidates are anti-mask and anti-CRT and a threat to the nonpartisan nature of local leadership. She said she wanted to ensure Black voters were aware there was potential political influence in the local election.

"We decided we couldn't pretend that it wasn't happening," Bennett said. "We needed to make sure our voters understood what's going on."

Bennett said she was especially worried about a possible uptick of political rhetoric seeping into the School Board. Ward 4 incumbent Malvina Kay, who ran unopposed, said her concern is that anyone who has political aspirations could use November School Board elections as a springboard.

"I'm concerned that it's going to be more political as opposed to local elections when you get to focus on local issues," Kay said.

But Dominguez said state and national issues should not be ignored in local campaigns. He said he believes party affiliation should be listed on the ballot so voters know where candidates stand.

"Unless you're a true independent, you cannot take politics out of a vote," Dominguez said.

Voters had mixed views on the municipal elections moving to November.

Longtime Ward 4 resident Claire Huie said she doesn't like to see partisanship in the city, but she's thankful for a higher turnout at the VFW Post 3103 precinct.

Karin Webber, who lives in Ward 3, said she's noticed more door-to-door visits from candidates and yard signs than in previous years.

Christina Manning said when she votes in city elections, she focuses strictly on local issues. She believes it's rare for city officials to influence state lawmakers.

"We're being asked our views on gun rights, abortion and other issues that local city officials have no say or input over," Rodriguez said. "We're trying to address safety on our roads and in our communities. That should never be a partisan issue."

Taft Coghill Jr: 540/374-5526

tcoghill@freelancestar.com

Taft Coghill

I've been covering Fredericksburg area communities since 2002, mainly as a sports reporter. I occasionally cover local government, as well.