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CHARTER PROPOSAL LETS RACES END IN MAY

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Summary: The change would save taxpayers money by not requiring a candidate to win again, backers say

Portland voters face one little-discussed question on their May 18 ballot, in addition to the higher-profile choices of picking a mayor and two city commissioners.

It's a proposed charter change that would eliminate a requirement that candidates for city office who top 50 percent in the May primary be on the ballot again in the November general election.

The question referred to voters by the City Council would take effect in May 2006. It leaves unchanged current provisions requiring a November election between the top two finishers in the primary if no candidate gets a majority in May.

City elections officer Susan Francois and City Auditor Gary Blackmer said the proposal is an overdue fix that would bring Portland's nonpartisan elections in step with Multnomah County and every other jurisdiction in Oregon.

Francois said the current setup leads to questions from voters in the fall about why a candidate who wins a majority in May appears again unopposed in November.

"We were trying to simplify it," Francois said. "It's a boring, bureaucratic housekeeping measure to make our lives easier and to lessen voter confusion."

In three-quarters of the 40 city elections since 1980, a candidate has received a majority in May and been required to run unopposed again in November, Blackmer said. The city auditor said that requirement creates extra costs for paperwork and staff time.

No arguments for or against the proposed change were submitted to the Voters' Pamphlet.

Opposition has arisen on the "Portland **Communique**," a weblog (<http://communique.portland.or.us>), read by Portland's political junkies. The weblog notes that less attention is given to the May primary and recommends an alternative: make the May election into a true primary where the top two finishers advance, regardless of whether one gets a majority.

The existing rules do allow for the possibility of a write-in campaign in November voters are unsatisfied with the May winner or new information emerges about that person.

The best November write-in showing by a candidate in the past 50 years was former Mayor Frank Ivancie. He got 25 percent in 1984 against Bud Clark, who had won outright in May.

If voters approve the charter change, Blackmer said the formula for calculating the number of signatures needed to get initiatives and referendums on the city ballot would need to change. That's because the current formula is based on the number of votes cast in the preceding general election.

A formula proposed by Blackmer for the council's consideration would be based on the number of registered voters.

Blackmer said that percentage would fluctuate less from election to election. Based on records over the past 20 years, the percentages recommended by Blackmer would produce slightly lower petition signature requirements to get an initiative or referendum on the ballot.

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