

**May 2011**  
**Tulsa League of Women Voters**  
**Unit Meeting Discussion Topic**

City Councilor Term of Office and  
City Elections to Coincide with Federal Election Schedule

**Overview**

One of the petitions circulated in the Fall 2010 by the Save Our Tulsa organizations calls for changing the term of office for City Councilors from three-year staggered terms back to two-year terms and for the elections of city councilors to coincide with the Federal/State election schedule (November of even numbered years). This petition has been validated by the City Clerk and will appear on the November 2011 ballot unless it is successfully challenged.

**Background**

In 1989 the City of Tulsa changed its form of government from a Commission form of government to a Strong Mayor/City Council form of government. Under the 1989 city charter the nine district councilors would serve two year terms. In November 2009 a proposed change to the city charter (Proposition 2) appeared on the ballot which lengthened the terms of city councilors from two years to three year terms beginning with the 2011 city council elections, and set in place a rotating schedule of district elections every year. The nine council seats were divided into three groups. In the 2011 election, terms of office would be different for each group. As a result, three seats are up for election each year. Districts are grouped as follows:

- Districts 1, 4 and 7 – Councilors elected in these districts serve one year until a 2012 election for three year terms
- Districts 2, 5 and 8 – Councilors elected in these districts serve two years until a 2013 election for three year terms.
- Districts 3, 6, and 9 – Councilors elected in these districts serve three year terms ending in 2014.

Proposition 2 passed by a vote of 35,718 (55.53%) to 28,607 (33.37%) according to the Tulsa County Election Board.

Arguments in favor of returning to the two-year terms of office for City Councilors and scheduling elections on the State/Federal cycle include:

- Returning to two-year terms would eliminate the need for essentially continuous election campaigns necessary under the current charter rules for electing city councilors. (Paraphrased from League of Women Voters of Metropolitan Tulsa’s 2009 Voter’s Guide).
- Current charter rules for staggered elections require that the City incur substantial additional expense to conduct council elections. Returning to the two-year terms and elections for councilors that adhere to the State/Federal cycle will eliminate those additional costs. (Paraphrased from League of Women Voters of Metropolitan Tulsa’s 2009 Voter’s Guide).
- Shorter terms of office make the council members more accountable to the citizens he/she represents
- Shorter terms of office make it easier to vote councilors out-of-office who are deemed ineffective or non-responsive to citizens. “It would take three years for an angered public to turn out all nine councilors in the case of scandal, making city government less responsive to the electorate.” (Tulsa World)
- Having the staggered election cycle reduces the total public interest in elections by reducing the number of seats on the ballot and will discourage voter turnout. (Tulsa World) Elections in odd numbered years typically have low voter turnout
- Three year staggered elections mean that council primary elections – which the charter says have to happen in September – can’t take place with state election equipment half of the time. State law says that in even-numbered years municipal elections can only use the state’s election system in certain months, and September isn’t one of them (Tulsa World)

Arguments in favor of retaining the current three year term and staggered election cycle include:

- Would assure that after each election there would be no more than three new members, and hence several experienced councilors would remain on the council. (from the League of Women Voters of Metropolitan Tulsa’s 2009 Voter’s Guide)

- With at most three councilors involved in re-election campaigns each year, the council should be better able to schedule and carry on its business during the campaign (from the League of Women Voters of Metropolitan Tulsa's 2009 Voter's Guide)
- Public debates and forums would involve fewer council candidates citywide, affording the electorate a better opportunity to learn the views and positions of the candidates. (from the League of Women Voters of Metropolitan Tulsa's 2009 Voter's Guide)
- Councilors who must run for re-election every two years will have to fund campaigns more often, making the expense a possible deterrent to running for office, and have a greater impact on economically disadvantaged candidates. Three year terms reduce these negative impacts to fielding candidates for councilor seats.
- It takes at least one year for a new councilor to get up to speed and then the second year they are running for reelection. Three year terms allow councilors to put their experience to work.

Arguments that could be made to support either position:

- Longer terms of office favor incumbents (name recognition, service record, etc.) – depends on how you feel about the incumbents

Unit Discussion Questions:

1. Would changing the councilor term of office back to two-year terms and holding elections on the State/Federal election cycle improve or diminish the impact on voter turnout?
2. Would changing the councilor term of office back to two-year terms and holding elections on the State/Federal election cycle improve or diminish the number of qualified candidates running for city councilor office?
3. Are there any additional arguments, pro or con, that you think should be added to the above analysis?
4. Does your unit favor or oppose returning the term of office for city councilors to two-year terms and holding election for on the State/Federal elections cycle?