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TOP STORY

## College Station City Council to consider moving elections to odd-numbered years

Megan Rodriguez

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**C**ollege Station voters may end up being tasked this year with deciding when the city's elections are held in the future.

On Thursday, city council members will consider a proposed charter amendment to move elections set in November of even-numbered years to odd-numbered years. If the language is approved by the council, the city could move forward with putting the item on the Nov. 2 ballot.

The idea of changing elections to odd-numbered years was debated among council members in February when they voted 4-3 not to bring the item back for future action at a later meeting. Councilmen John Crompton, Bob Brick and Dennis Maloney at the time were in favor of changing to odd-numbered years. The issue was revived at the end of the council's last meeting in June, when Crompton brought up the subject following a discussion about two separate charter amendments that will be on the November ballot.

Arguments in favor of keeping even-numbered years included a desire to conduct elections when there is higher voter turnout, while arguments for switching to odd-numbered years have included a concern that local elections could be overshadowed when they fall at the same time as higher-level governmental races.

“To me, I think it is inappropriate that we keep on the even years,” Crompton said at the last meeting.

The city is currently transitioning from three-year terms to four-year terms for council members. City Secretary Carla Robinson said in February that if elections are left alone, it will take until 2024 to fully finish the transition to four-year terms. If the elections switch to odd-numbered years, it will take until 2027 to complete the shift.

Prior to 2018, College Station’s general election was held annually each November, according to the upcoming city council agenda. In 2018, the city charter was amended to hold the general election in November of each even-numbered year. Prior to 2012, elections were held in May.

Councilwoman Linda Harvell in February said she was against switching to odd-numbered years, but at the last council meeting she said her opinion had changed to be in favor of switching. She credited a letter to the editor in *The Eagle* written by former College Station Mayor Ben White as being “a big eye opener.” The letter said voters should be allowed to choose whether or not future elections be held in odd-numbered years.

Councilwoman Elizabeth Cunha was strongly opposed to the idea in February and at the last council meeting. In those meetings she expressed concern with the fact that fewer people vote and there are fewer polling locations during odd-numbered year elections.

In the past several November elections in odd-numbered years, the highest voter turnout was just over 10%, according to a February presentation to the council from Robinson. Voter turnout in even-numbered election years ranged from 35% up to 70%.

In response to some council members saying that it can be expensive for a local candidate to run when there are national and state elections happening, Cunha pointed out that she earned the most votes in November 2018 and November 2020 despite spending the least amount of money out of any candidate.

“More people vote in even-numbered years,” Cunha said. “And I’m sorry if you feel like that is a bad thing. I think that is a wonderful thing. It means people have access to the polls, we have 25 polling locations, everyone knows there’s an election.”

In a Thursday interview, Mayor Karl Mooney said that if the elections were moved to odd-numbered years that there would be an effort to open as many polling locations as possible, but said it may not be the exact same number as in even-numbered years.

While Councilman John Nichols was not at the most recent council meeting, in February he said he was against the idea of changing the elections to be held in odd-numbered years.

In February, Mooney said that he shared Nichols’ and Cunha’s perspectives.

“I am somewhat taken aback by the huge difference in the number of people who actually participate in the voting process in the even years, particularly the presidential election years, versus the other years,” he said at the time.

Even so, Mooney said he was also concerned about voters who don’t know much about the local elections they vote in or who have voter fatigue by the time they get down to the local races on the ballot. Ultimately, at the February meeting Mooney said he wanted to wait for some time before asking voters about changing elections to odd-numbered years.

In an interview last week, Mooney pointed out that if the charter amendment does end up on the ballot and voters turn it down, the issue wouldn’t be brought to voters again for another two years.

City Secretary Tanya Smith pointed out at the February meeting that it could be more expensive to hold elections in odd-numbered years, in part because fewer entities in Brazos County hold their elections at that time. Smith said that an election usually costs about \$90,000 and is divided up between other entities within the county holding elections at the same time.

Cost could also be higher, Smith said, since runoff elections are far more common in odd-numbered years than in even-numbered years due to low voter turnout. Smith said that the most recent runoff election cost the city about \$40,000.

Smith also said in February that she didn't personally feel like a charter amendment to change from even to odd-numbered years should happen at this time.

Similar to some others on the council, Brick said in a recent interview that the cost difference does not stand out to him as a major issue in part because there are usually school board or other elections around the same time meaning College Station wouldn't have to hold an election on its own.

"And these expenses are relatively minor in the grand scheme of the city budgets and so forth," Brick said. "And I see that as a small factor, relative to the larger issue in my mind, of getting people's attention — being able to compete for people's attention."

Many arguments against switching to odd-numbered years don't strike Maloney as problems that outweigh the benefits of being able to focus on local issues in an even-numbered year election. In a Wednesday interview, one example he used is that while many people express concern about lower voter turnout during odd-numbered years, just as many people are eligible to vote in odd- and even numbered years.

"But the point is that I just really dislike the business of state and national issues obfuscating local issues," Maloney said.

Crompton has expressed similar sentiments in public meetings, also adding that "a majority" of people make "entirely arbitrary decisions" when voting for some of the races.

"Sometimes they check the first box, and there is evidence over the last couple elections where that is a major advantage ... But they don't know anything about the people who are running and it is absolutely a lottery," Crompton said at the June council meeting when he asked for odd-numbered year elections to be reconsidered.

“You might as well spin a coin right from the get-go. A democracy doesn’t just require that people vote, it assumes an informed public at least at some level, and that we do not have.”

There are studies that show that things as seemingly insignificant as being placed first on the ballot can actually be helpful in garnering more votes, A&M Political Science Professor Kirby Goidel said.

“A lot of things can come into play,” Goidel said. “That’s definitely an argument, that voters don’t always vote on the most reasonable basis, but that’s often true of national elections; that’s true in a democracy. We can’t make people vote in a reasoned, rational way. They vote how they want, and it may be based on all sorts of factors.”

Goidel said he isn’t generally in favor of arguments that are made for moving elections to odd-numbered years since such a change often means there will likely be low voter turnout. Further, he said that most people who vote in off-cycle elections tend to be higher-income individuals and those who are more powerful locally. He said that people with less flexible jobs or those with children could sometimes be the ones most inconvenienced when they are asked to go out to vote more often.

“The argument is that there will be more focus on local issues, which is true if there is actually more focus on local issues, but in some cases those elections just kind of fly under the radar,” Goidel pointed out of elections in odd-numbered years. “Really, what drives it are organized and vested interest in the local community.”

Goidel said that deciding when elections should be held is really a matter of what a community values most: having more people turn out to vote and hopefully having a better reflection of the community, or having a separate election that can focus more on local issues.

“When you go more local and you separate these things out, it leaves the potential for greater bias — for a voting electorate that doesn’t look as much like the community,” Goidel said. “And so it’s just a question of how we see democracy and what we think we want our elections to look like and what we want them based on.”

The College Station city council will take a vote on Thursday to determine if a charter amendment to change elections to odd-numbered years will be presented to voters on the November ballot. The meeting starts after 5 p.m.

If the council votes to put the issue regarding switching to odd-numbered years on the ballot, it will be one of three charter amendments. The other two are related to ethical requirements for council members.

Read a longer version of this article at **[theeagle.com](https://theeagle.com)**.

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