



TOWN OF FAIRFAX

STAFF REPORT

February 4, 2015

TO: Mayor and Town Council

FROM: Michele Gardner, Town Clerk *MG*

SUBJECT: Discuss/consider initiating a community conversation on the issue of expanding the voting age of the Fairfax electorate on local municipal ballot issues to all town residents 16 years and older

RECOMMENDATION

Discuss the attached memorandum and direct staff as appropriate

DISCUSSION

Councilmember Weinsoff and Vice Mayor Goddard asked that this matter be added to the agenda for consideration by the Council. They submitted the attached memo as background.

FISCAL IMPACT

N/a

ATTACHMENT

Council Memorandum



Town of Fairfax Councilmember Memorandum

TO: Mayor and Town Council

FROM: Councilmember Weinsoff and Vice-Mayor Goddard

DATE: February 4, 2015

SUBJECT: Discussion/Consideration of Initiating Community Conversation on the Issue of Expanding the Voting Age of the Fairfax Electorate on Local Municipal Ballot Issues to All Town Residents 16 years and Older

RECOMMENDATION

1. Start a community conversation about extending the right to vote to Fairfax residents age 16 and above; and
2. Appoint Councilmember Weinsoff and Vice-Mayor Goddard to a Council Subcommittee to initiate and coordinate the input process; and
3. Direct staff, including the Town Attorney, to research the legal and financial considerations associated with this concept.

BACKGROUND

Though in a different time and a different era, Senator Edward Kennedy's statements in the spring of 1970 supporting the movement to lower the voting age from 21 to 18 speak directly to further expansion of the vote in our time – "I believe the time has come to lower the voting age in the United States and thereby to bring American youth into the mainstream of our political process. To me, this is the most important single principle we can pursue as a nation if we are to succeed in bringing our youth into full and lasting participation in our institutions of demographic government."

Both at home and abroad there is a recognition that the time has come again to consider further expansion of voting rights to 16 and 17 year olds. The observation of a teenager addressing her City Council in Maryland, recounted in a recent New York Times article attached to this Memorandum, offers a big-picture basis for our conversation – "Hyattsville should lower the voting age to 16 so that more young people can get started being active in their communities, which will continue with them their entire lives." She was persuasive. The Council majority agreed and the Hyattsville electorate will expand in its up-coming May election.

The on-line archive of writings on this issue is rich with arguments in support of an expanded franchise, among them:

- By the age of 16, a teenager is well on the path to becoming an adult, making decisions about their future education and career path, having the right to drive, and being responsible for paying municipally-imposed taxes on their purchases.
- The future of our community will shortly be in their hands, and bringing their voice into that conversation now will better ensure they become aware of, and are actively engaged in, the public safety, financial, and social challenges facing our local community.

CONCLUSION

Consistent with our practice of advancing important matters of local governance that are just over the horizon, the Fairfax Council should raise this matter for our collective conversation and consideration. The idea already has momentum, witnessed in county and state programs such as “Youth in Government” and the popularity of civics clubs and classes at Sir Francis Drake High School. Extending the right to vote to 16 and 17 year olds honors young people’s desire to have their voices heard and to participate in local decision making, and it provides the opportunity for educators to incorporate into their curriculum the issues at the center of our local governance.

It is recommended that the Council form a subcommittee consisting of Vice-Mayor Goddard and Councilmember Weinsoff to initiate community outreach on this issue, requiring it to report back to the full Council on a regular basis. If feasible, the goal would be to target the November, 2017 municipal election. Given the complex legal issues and unknown financial costs associated with holding an election to include voters 16 years and older, we also recommend that staff, including the Town Attorney, research the legal and financial issues and report its analysis to the Subcommittee, which will incorporate this information into its periodic updates to the Council.