

**City of Takoma Park Task Force on Voting Preliminary Report:
Recommendations for the November 2013 Regular Election
Monday, September 23, 2013**

Introduction

The Right to Vote Task Force of Takoma Park believes the City could improve its elections by spreading awareness about the positions up for election, the candidates, and the voting process; engaging with community members less likely to vote; and creating an in-it-together culture around city elections. To this end, we provide the following recommendations for actions the City and others can take toward meeting these goals during the upcoming election.

Spreading Awareness Of The Election

Public Service Announcements

Public service announcements (PSAs) provide a great way to spread information and encourage voters to head to the polls. City TV should create and disseminate additional PSAs with information about the new charter amendment, polling location, and other critical information about the City elections.

Signage

Signage helps voters who are looking for polling stations; they also remind voters of elections and subtly push potential voters to go to the polls. The City should take actions to ensure the placement of signs and flyers in local businesses and public buildings throughout the City.

Targeted Facebook Ads

Facebook provides an excellent medium for reaching youth and more transient members of the community. Facebook allows for targeted ads by zip code, which could reach anyone with an account who lives in the City. The ad could use an informational style or could link back to the election pages on the City's website. Additionally, the City could set the election up as an Event on Facebook, which would allow people to "RSVP" (i.e., pledge to vote). The City and other organizations could encourage people to adopt the City's VOTE logo as their profile image for the week or two leading up to the election, and the City could create shareable content to take advantage of viral social networking effects. The City could pay to promote certain election related posts to increase their visibility.

Candidate Promotion Of City Election Rules

Information provided to candidates by the City should include information on voter registration rules, the instant runoff voting process, and City voter resources. The Task Force encourages candidates to share this information widely with potential eligible voters during their campaigns. The Task Force urges the City and its staff to urge candidates to do the same when providing these materials in order to maximize voter education efforts.

Press Outreach & Publicity

In addition to notices in the City Newsletter, the City should endeavor to make sure that the Voice and the Gazette publish all relevant election information released by the City meant for residents eligible to vote. This includes information on the City's new and existing laws as well as notices requesting individuals to fill vacancies on the Task Force, the Board of Elections, and to recruit election judges. As the City already publicizes information on City committees and their vacancies in the City newsletter and on the City's website, the Voice could be encouraged to keep this information up to date in its publications as well.

Engaging Community Members In The Process

Polling Rides

In 2008, more than a million citizens nationwide could not vote due to the inconvenience of the process. A number of these lost votes can be attributed to an inability to get to a designated polling station. Groups can work to alleviate this burden by offering free rides to polling stations. This is a particularly good idea for established organizations, such as churches, as people regularly come together in these groups to organize consistent programs. Groups giving rides to the polls should strive to make the process as convenient as possible for voters. Websites such as ZimRide.com have proven useful in the past for setting up group carpools, including for rides to the polls on Election Day.

Outreach to Low Voting Participation Groups

The Task Force is working to prepare helpful lists of organizations and individuals that can help to connect with hard to reach and new groups of eligible voters as well as the general population of the City. All those interested in increasing voter turnout in the City should make use of these resources when available.

Creating a Culture Of Voting

Encourage Group Voting

Group voting consists of individuals going to polling places together in a group to vote. Group voting could increase the youth vote, particularly among 16- and 17- year olds, as they will be voting with their friends as a social activity. Voting in a group creates a pro-voting culture that promotes the value of everyone's right to have their say. Doodle.com provides just one example of a resource that can help group voting organizers coordinate the schedules of the group.

Organizational Reminders

Most people belong to some association or another through their workplaces, service programs, religious affiliations, etc. Asking these groups to remind their members about voting – the dates of the election and early voting, how to find their polling places, the absentee voting process, and other useful information – is an easy, effective way to reach a captive audience. Group e-mails, mailings, and announcements at events provide additional viable methods for encouraging members to vote.

Encourage Voting As A Family Event

Children and teens learn the importance of voting and develop it as a habit when parents and society involve them consistently. The City can encourage parents to bring their children to the polls consistently every election, whether to observe the process when still too young to vote or to participate at the same time once eligible to vote.

Encourage Friendly Competition for Turnout

Contested races are the best way to increase turnout; however, in the absence of competitive elections, a little artificial competition can help. Encouraging inter-ward competition for turnout could provide motivation for more residents to show up at the polls on Election Day. The city could come up with a creative way to recognize the ward with the highest turnout.

Recruit Student Service Learning Volunteers

Students in Montgomery County public high schools are required to earn 75 Student Service Learning (SSL) hours (volunteer hours) before graduation. Many high school students are eager to earn these hours by working in their hometowns, making high schools an excellent source of unpaid volunteers to register voters, spread the word at events, and otherwise help get out the vote. Advertising "SSL opportunities" for high school students through schools and websites such as mcpsssl.org is an effective way to get volunteers.

Reaching Ex-Offenders

The City now allows anyone convicted of a non-election related offense to regain the right to vote in City election once no longer incarcerated. This follows research that shows that engaging individuals in the community by creating meaningful connections and involvement decreases the risk of the individual becoming re-involved in the criminal justice system. To reach this group, the City should contact the local courts and corrections officers to make sure that newly released individuals who will live in the City know about their right to vote in City elections. The City should pay particular attention to making sure that parole and probation officers know about this right and communicate it to the individuals they oversee.

Acknowledgements

Finally, the Task Force thanks the City Council for its interest in increasing civic engagement within the City. We look forward to providing our final report with more long-term recommendations for how the City can continue to promote this important democratic right. The Task Force also expresses our appreciation to the City staff for their assistance with the fulfilling the charge set forth by the Council.

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