LOCAL NEWS

Lake Forest Caucus considering amending bylaws to allow electronic voting for residents

Lake Forest Caucus President Regina Etherton delivers an update on the organization at a July 30 meeting at the Gorton Community Center. (Daniel I. Dorfman/ for the Pioneer Press)

By **DANIEL I. DORFMAN** | Pioneer Press

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Lake Forest Caucus officials are interested in creating an electronic voting option for residents and holding off, at least temporarily, on making changes to provide direction in case the Caucus Committee and the general membership have a dispute.

Caucus officials have scheduled a vote at its October 14 annual meeting to amend the organization's bylaws and create alternative voting options, including electronic voting, Caucus President Regina Etherton said at a July 30 meeting. Currently, the Caucus only permits in-person voting at its meetings, where a main function often is to ratify a candidate slate for upcoming elections.

Etherton said there are several groups of voters, including the elderly, physically challenged, and residents who travel extensively want to participate in Caucus elections, but can not do so now under the current requirements.

"There are probably 10 categories of people we have heard from who have been precluded from voting because they had to appear in person. We are trying to address that problem. We want everyone in Lake Forest to vote," Etherton said.

She pointed out that there have been some Caucus elections where only 250 people voted.

An ad hoc committee created last year to examine and recommend updates to the Caucus's bylaws unanimously recommended the creation of an electronic voting system, believing it represents an important step technologically.

"Let's all be straight," Ad Hoc Committee member Stewart Dixon said at the July 30 meeting. "We are no longer looking at a VHS tape; we are now all streaming."

Caucus officials have studied possible issues with electronic voting, and they have received assurances that it is safe, secure, and feasible, Etherton said. She added that they have received proposals from three vendors seeking the contract.

However, other challenges regarding electronic voting are in place as the Caucus works toward the October vote.

Caucus officials estimate implementing an electronic voting system would cost about $20,000, in addition to legal fees and other costs, including continuation of in-person voting until a transition to alternative voting is complete.

Still, the Caucus has scheduled the vote for its annual meeting, where other types of alternative voting, such as mail-in voting, would now be permitted. Two-thirds of the members will have to support it.

With the attention on electronic voting, the Caucus leadership is holding off on another recommendation from the ad hoc committee changing the bylaws in case of a “no vote” from the membership on a Caucus Committee endorsement.

That was the case in 2022 when the 43-member Caucus Committee – composed of representatives from each of the city’s four wards – endorsed Stanford “Randy” Tack for mayor, but in a very unusual occurrence, the general membership did not ratify it.

With the bylaws unclear on how to proceed, the Caucus Committee proceeded with Tack as the candidate. Former Alderwoman Prue Beidler, the other finalist who appeared before the Caucus Committee, then forged an independent mayor campaign against Tack in the April 2023 municipal election, which Tack easily won.

The Caucus Committee then had two other defeats in subsequent internal elections, and eventually, the ad hoc committee was formed, charged with examining the Caucus bylaws.

Former City Manager Bob Kiely served as the committee’s facilitator, and they recommended a process that, if there is a no vote by the general membership, the matter should revert to the Caucus Committee to come up with multiple candidates, believing that would give voters a greater choice.

That proposed amendment was originally set to go before the Caucus membership in the spring, but did not materialize. A vote that was to be slated for the October meeting will not occur.

Etherton said there were 29 overall recommendations from the ad hoc committee delivered in February.

Etherton said there was not enough time for the Caucus hierarchy to review all the suggestions in time for the October election, plus there was no community input, and the ad hoc committee had not formally met with two prominent Caucus committees.

Moreover, there was no time to complete all the recommendations and complete required Caucus business, such as vetting candidates and setting up its executive board.

“We want to hear from the community at large in case there is a no vote,” Etherton said after the meeting. “We have to get a 2/3 vote, and we want to make sure that is representative of the entire population.”

Beidler, who attended the July 30 meeting, expressed concern that there has yet to be a vote on what to do in case of a no vote.

“When a commitment is made that something is going to be done by a certain date and then it is not done, there is a concern from among those who believed that commitment is genuine to wonder what next,” Beidler said. “What we thought was a high priority has changed, and something else seems to be a high priority. You can understand why there is some confusion.”

Etherton said there is consideration for a special election to handle the issue after October.

This past April, the Caucus slate did not face any formal opposition in the municipal elections.

The Caucus has scheduled another meeting for August 13 at the Gorton Community Center at 7 p.m. regarding the issue.

Daniel I. Dorfman is a freelance reporter for Pioneer Press.

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