

## Lee commissioners divided over whether to push for single-member districts

By CHARLIE WHITEHEAD

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A divided Lee County Commission took a halting step this week toward putting single-member districts on the November ballot.

Two commissioners, Ray Judah and Chairwoman Tammy Hall, pushed to create a county committee to study various options for electing commissioners, but they couldn't get a majority.

Commissioner Bob Janes stood that majority on its head before Christmas when he announced he would support placing the issue on the ballot. Janes had voted against ballot issue in 2008.

Currently, Lee County commissioners must reside within their district but are elected by countywide vote. For many years groups like the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People have pushed for a change that would see commissioners elected only by the voters living within their districts.

Commissioners couldn't even agree to see a presentation on the issue.

"This issue is so clear to the five of us up here and the people in this room," Commissioner Frank Mann said.

There were over 50 in attendance at the workshop despite the fact no public comment was heard.

Hall compared the ballot issue to others she said were rushed onto Florida ballots, like the class size amendment and high-speed rail, that produced unforeseen consequences. She said she wants to be sure whatever commissioners place before voters is the best option. For example, she said one alternative would be four elected countywide and three by district.

"I do believe it's knee-jerk to throw away the other alternatives," she said.

Mann, however, said he sensed a strategy of delay, a statement that drew applause from the crowd and a gavel from Hall. He said the Charter Review Committee that met for more than a year in 2007 and 2008 argued the issue long and hard and voted 9-6 in favor of the ballot issue.

It failed because the charter called for a two-thirds vote.

“What we’re talking about here today, it is categorically unfair to label knee-jerk,” he said.

Janes said he doesn’t want to create a county committee, but he’d hope other organizations would host meetings to discuss the issue.

Those pushing the issue have created a Political Action Committee, one with Republicans, Democrats, Libertarians and the NAACP all represented. Joe D’Alessandro, retired longtime state attorney for Southwest Florida, is offering the group advice.

“I was asked to come to a meeting and I saw a coalition of groups I haven’t seen come together for a long time,” he said. “I’ve always been in favor of single-member districts.



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