

Committee Implodes, Takes Down Newbie

by Rex Gressett, May 8, 2019 · No Comment

It crept out of the shadows like a slime thing and presented itself at the Fort Bragg city council meeting wrapped in ambiguity.

It was a little plot, a one-man power grab. It was ugly but a little silly, certainly not a threat, and no problem for the City Council. They disposed of it with the contempt it deserved. But for newbie Councilperson Tess Albin-Smith it was a massive embarrassment. For Scott Menzies, it was the end of a sweet little dream.

In the years since Menzies lost the 2014 Council election, he has been absent from the political dialogue. But privately he had been doing some deep thinking. Obviously fair elections were standing in the way of his ambitions

Easy fix: change the election system.

The CVRA (California Voting Rights Act) and the Fort Bragg response to it, the ESRC (Election System Review Committee) were heaven-sent for Menzies.

Menzies jumped on it with both boots and Tess Albin-Smith jumped with him.

In case you came in late, general elections in Fort Bragg are effectively over. We are just waiting for the ax to fall.

The California Voting Rights Act divides the city into districts and changes general elections into tiny neighborhood contests. Instead of the rigorous selection of the very best candidates, voters get to choose from any one of their immediate neighbors.

Districts in Fort Bragg will be limited to about 500 voters. You can pick from any one of them, foolish or ambitious enough to run. In an act of monumental cowardness and contempt for democracy, the California legislature rigged the system so that any attorney could force districting on any elected body.

The legislature paved the path to fake democracy with gold. Attorneys routinely take home million-dollar, sometimes multi-million-dollar, settlements suing cities under the new law. Of course, cities fight to keep general elections, but so far, every one of them has lost the fight; only tiny Fort Bragg has managed a brief reprieve.

In Fort Bragg, we are simply waiting for the end.

The City Council doesn't know what to do about the California Voting Rights Act, but they are very sure voters won't like it, and they are devoutly hoping they won't be blamed. Not that it will affect them.

Mayor Will Lee told me Wednesday he thinks he can be elected as a neighborhood representative even if we do lose our most basic electoral rights to a general election.

The Council doesn't talk about it of course, instead, under the duress of legal pressure, they appointed a committee to do nothing officially. The Election System Review Committee was tasked with the thankless and hopeless task of working out a solution to a problem that has no solution.

Every cloud has a silver lining for somebody. In this assault on democratic freedom, Scott Menzies discerned opportunity. His vision was "Ranked-Choice Voting." Ranked choice voting is an innovative system where every voter votes for EVERY candidate.

Huh?

Technically, it is voting — but practically it flies in the face of every value we hold dear in our politically engaged little community. In ranked-choice voting, you don't vote against anyone (God forbid); instead, you "rank" the candidates; first choice, second choice, third choice, and so on.

Scott Menzies is on record saying that back in 2014 he MUST have been everybody's SECOND choice. All the Will Lee voters and all the Bernie Norvell voters surely liked the immensely charming Mr. Menzies at least a little. How could they not?

Ranked-choice voting will not protect the city from districting. The city can change the voting system or sue the state or line up and scream, but it cannot stop California Voting Rights Act districting.

At least none of the hundreds of California cities and school boards have stopped it.

The Election System Review Committee was never intended to actually DO anything. It couldn't do anything and it didn't do anything. But neither would they cave in to Scott Menzies cherished plan for ranked choice voting.

When the committee balked at Menzies' rapid advocacy for his own special project, Tess Albin-Smith broke the seven-person committee into subcommittees of TWO. She and Scott went off to talk about ranked-choice voting between the two of them.

When the city council convened, they were a little surprised to find that Tess Albin-Smith and her fellow subcommittee person, Mr. Menzies had bypassed the committee and were asking for a letter of support from the City Council supporting Menzies ranked-choice voting system.

Councilman Lindy Peters shot it down like a pro. Councilperson Tess Albin-Smith, devoid of parliamentary savvy, put it up for a motion anyway. Perhaps for the first time ever — a Councilperson presented a motion to the Council that failed for lack of a second. Has that ever happened in the long historical record?

The Election System Review Committee was scheduled to meet this week. Mayor Lee and Tess Albin Smith stopped that. The committee has formally imploded. Our new Mayor tells me the Council needs to "rethink the whole business."

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