

Burlington mayoral candidates weigh-in on instant runoff voting

Monday February 23, 2009

Ross Sneyd

Colchester, VT

Options



At the debate left to right are Progressive Bob Kiss, the incumbent; Democrat Andy Montroll; debate moderator Ken Picard of Seven Days newspaper; independent Dan Smith; and Republican Kurt Wright

(Host) Town Meeting Day is a little more than a week away, when Vermonters will vote on a variety of municipal issues.

The highest profile contest is the race for mayor of Burlington.

And, as VPR's Ross Sneyd report, the race could well be decided by an instant runoff.

(sound of ballroom crowd)

(Sneyd) The mayor's race has been playing out in rooms like this hotel ballroom.

There are four leading contenders, and they've met in a series of debates and forums. The other night they had debates back to back.

(Seats) ``... We're running just a teeny bit late here and the candidates have another of these at 8 o'clock this evening. So we promised that we would get them out of here by 7:30 so please take your seats and we'll start in about one minute.''

(Sneyd) First, was this one, sponsored by AARP, the group representing older voters.

For almost an hour and 15 minutes, the issues were familiar. A rewrite of the city's zoning bylaws. Affordable housing. Development on the waterfront.

And then, finally, a question was asked that gets to the heart of the Burlington race. Ken Picard, a reporter for the newspaper Seven Days, moderated.

(Picard) ``This is about instant runoff voting. Do you think instant runoff voting has been good for this campaign and if so why? If not, why not?''

(Sneyd) An uneasy laugh went up among the candidates. They're not sure how a runoff might turn out - but they're confident there will be one.

City law requires a candidate to win 50 percent of the vote to take the mayor's office. Voters can rank candidates in their order of preference. Second-place votes are counted if no one gets a majority.

Incumbent Mayor Bob Kiss, a Progressive, likes the system.

(Kiss) `` We moved to this plan in order to have majority-elected mayors. I was elected mayor as a result of instant runoff voting so I think the system works pretty well." laughter

(Sneyd) But there is criticism. Republican Kurt Wright.

(Wright) `` I don't want campaigns that sort of all mush to the middle. I think voters want us to take strong positions and not be afraid. I think instant runoff voting, one of the challenges, no one wants to say anything too strong because it might alienate somebody else's second-place voters."

(Sneyd) Even more challenging for the candidates is to figure out the dynamics of the race. Who might choose them second? How might that help?

As they argue about how to make streets pedestrian friendly or how to repair city schools, they're careful.

Democrat Andy Montroll took a very gentle dig at Kiss. Montroll suggested city officials need to put themselves in the seat of a senior citizen's motorized scooter to see how bad the sidewalks are.

(Montroll) `` I think it would be a really good idea if the mayor, some of the other city employees, particularly those in public works, if we all got into a scooter like her and went down some of the sidewalks and see what it's like for ourselves."

(Sneyd) Independent Dan Smith isn't so subtle. Unlike him, the other three have been in city politics for years. Here he criticizes a zoning rewrite that took six years.

(Smith) `` And it was a substantial missed opportunity. And I'm the only candidate that brings the fresh look and the fresh perspective that's really going to be necessary to rethink how we do housing around the downtown, around the neighborhood centers."

(Sneyd) All four of the leading contenders have one other factor to consider. James Simpson is the Green Party candidate. No one's sure who his voters will mark as their second choice.

For VPR News, I'm Ross Sneyd.

© Copyright 2008, [VPR](#)

This is the online edition of VPR News. Text versions of VPR news stories may be updated and they may vary slightly from the broadcast version.