A commission that resembles its citizens

By Andrew Reding

Frustration is running high on Lee County’s barrier islands, the “Lee Island Coast”. Collectively, Boca Grande, Captiva, Upper Captiva, Pine Island, Sanibel, Fort Myers Beach, and Bonita Beach pay something like a third of all Lee County taxes. Yet we have no representation we can truly call our own on the County Commission. In a recent survey conducted by the Committee of the Islands on Sanibel and Captiva, dissatisfaction with our nominal representative hit a staggering 98%. That has led to calls for creation of a barrier island county.

There is, of course, no chance the state legislature would approve the creation of a new county. It wouldn’t even be a good idea, as it would require the creation of a whole new bureaucracy—new county commission, new sheriff, new school board, new mosquito control district—to serve a string of islands geographically isolated from each other. What’s more, we are all neighbors, islanders and mainlanders alike, so that we should be aiming to work together for a better future, not pretending we can split apart.

Yet the frustration felt by our island citizens points to the need for a more inclusive county commission. As John Adams put it, a legislature “should be an exact portrait, in miniature, of the people at large.”

Where is representation?

Whatever one thinks of the current Lee County commission, it is anything but a “portrait, in miniature” of the people of this county. There is not one woman on the Commission. There is no African-American or Latino. There is not one Democrat though a third of the voters are Democrats. The last barrier islander to serve was Sanibel’s Porter Goss, and he got on through appointment, not election.

In an editorial, the News-Press suggested the possibility of increasing the number of commissioners from 5 to 7, as allowed by state law. There is certainly merit in the idea, given the county’s rapid growth in population. Yet unless we were to change the method by which we elect commissioners, the only difference is that we would likely end up with seven white Republican men in business suits instead of five white Republican men in business suits. We would be no nearer to a truly diverse, representative commission.

The problem lies in the method of election. Though commissioners must live in their respective districts, they are elected by countywide majorities. With no room for minority representation, it is no wonder there is so little diversity, whether geographic, ethnic, or political.

Two remedies

There are two possible remedies. One would be to elect by district. That could conceivably offer some improvement, though not with current district boundaries, which
make little political sense. Sanibel and Captiva, for instance, are bundled with Cape Coral, which is a much larger community, with differing needs and interests. To remedy this problem, we could increase the number of commissioners to seven, and create a barrier island district.

But districting has its own problems. Though it improves geographic representation, it does little to afford representation to minorities, be they ethnic or political. What’s more, the power to redistrict is almost invariably abused to create safe seats for incumbents. That restricts competition, and thus democracy.

There is another option, which does not suffer from any of these defects. It is known as choice or preference voting. Under this option, and assuming an increase to seven commissioners, all seven would continue to be elected at-large, as they are now. But they would be elected all at once, and citizens would vote for up to seven candidates, ranking them in order of preference. Any candidate winning one-seventh of the first-choice votes would be elected. The candidate receiving the least first-choice votes would be disqualified, and the corresponding second-choice votes would be redistributed among the remaining candidates, and the process repeated until seven candidates are elected.

That would afford representation to any community of interest that could win one-seventh of the vote. The barrier islands could surely win a seat on the commission in that way; so could African-Americans or Latinos. Women could win at least a couple. So could Democrats.

Without safe districts, there would be no safe seats. There would be no wasted votes, since those whose first choices were disqualified would have their second and third choices influence the outcome. Wherever this method has been used, it has led to increased voter turnout and a legislature that more closely resembles the people it is supposed to represent.

We could have the same in Lee County, bringing us together to build a future we can all be proud of.

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