

The History of Single Member Districts in Sarasota County, Florida

by Kindra Muntz, May 28, 2020

The first referendum to change County Commission elections from At-large to single member districts passed in 1992, but was overturned in 1994 after a concerted campaign by moneyed interests supporting the majority of Commissioners. The reasons for changing to single member districts in 1992 were the same then as they were for the campaign that started in 2016: to restore integrity to county elections by returning them to the grassroots; empower neighborhoods, reduce control of big money over elections, and reduce the cost of campaigning by 80%. In 1992 the population of Sarasota County was 284,880. By 2016 it had grown by 50% to 412, 968. Sarasota County is now the 14th largest of 67 counties statewide. It is so big that it encompasses three and a half statewide legislative districts, each of which elects its State Representative in the district. Also, of the 13 larger counties and two immediately smaller, nine use single member districts or a blended system for electing their County Commissioners.

In Sarasota County in 2016, with At-large Commission elections, the cost of campaigning countywide had become prohibitive, so only people with significant funding—often from large developers and dark money PACs—could effectively compete. The result was that the resulting Commissioners were largely beholden to developers and granted special exceptions and tax breaks that benefited them, and not the people living in the districts. In addition, overruns by developers often meant that we the public taxpayers got to foot the bill. Having just the voters in each district elect their County Commissioners was seen as a critical way to address this problem.

THE CAMPAIGN

2016

In the spring of 2016, concerned citizens asked SAFE to sponsor a petition drive for two referendums to amend the County Charter to change the way we elect County Commissioners and Charter Review Board members in Sarasota County from At-large to single member district.

In August, SAFE issued a press release “Sarasota Alliance for Fair Elections Sponsors Single-Member District Charter Amendment Petition Drive.” Interestingly, two days later, a reporter from the Observer newspaper group called to ask how many petitions were required and when we hoped to get the referendum on the ballot. Our SAFE website was updated. Plans for mobilizing volunteer petition-gatherers were discussed. Volunteers were contacted. In October, signs were purchased “Local Control IN—Big \$\$\$ OUT”.



2017

However, until March, 2017, volunteer efforts were slow. People seemed distracted by the results of the November, 2016 Presidential election. SAFE reached out to students from Pine View School to design a T-shirt for volunteers and to help with social media outreach.



We researched documents from the citizens' successful 1992 SMD campaign and the 1994 Commissioner's ordinance on the ballot that overturned single member districts. By April we were on the lookout for events for tabling and petition-gathering at libraries, the Nokomis Drum Circle and the April 15th Bridge Walk. Supervisor of Elections Ron Turner confirmed that the number of verified petitions required was 15,096, or 5% of the registered voters in the last General Election (11-8-2016), or 301,925 voters.

By May, only 1,300 petitions of each had been collected. Enhanced petition-gathering strategies included outreach at Farmers' Markets, walking Main Street Sarasota, Siesta Beach, use of colored paper for petitions, and online encouragement of petition-gathering using Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, website, and email blasts. Coalition partners were needed. By August, our goal of having 17,000 signed petitions by December 31 seemed no longer reachable. We decided not to gather petitions outside until October due to the hot weather. We discussed using paid petition-gatherers and the need to raise money to pay them, but no decision was made. We decided to expand the SAFE board with more diversity of viewpoint. Dan Lobeck was invited and accepted our invitation to serve on the board. Ron Turner said suggested deadlines for petitions for the August 28 Primary in 2018 would be April 18, for the November 6 General Election would be June 28.

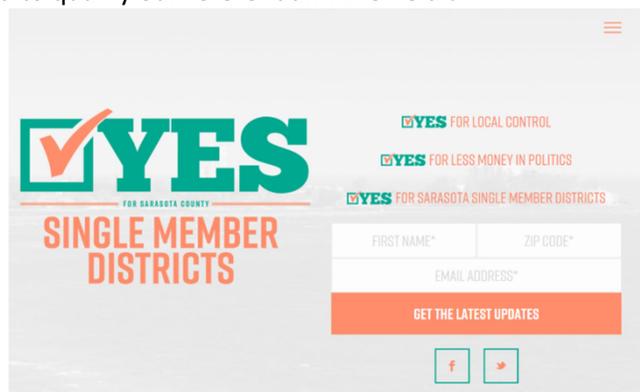
October 2, 2017 we voted to limit the petition drive to County Commission elections only. Volunteers said it was too hard to explain the Charter Review Board to people. October 6, 2017 we launched an all-out effort to raise funds to hire paid petition-gatherers to supplement our volunteer efforts for two months. A local coordinator of paid petition-gatherers was engaged, along with a professional coordinator from October 13-December 15. Our own volunteers kept gathering petitions at the Sun Fiesta, sports events, the Sarasota County Fair, the Critical Times conference, LWV meetings, Tiger Bay meetings, CONA meetings, and the Nina Turner event at the Venice Yacht Club.

2018

February, 2018 We decided to try to gather enough petitions to hold a Special Election in June, to benefit the County Commission candidates in Districts 2 and 4 on the November ballot. Ron Turner said all petitions must be in by March 16 to do that. Even with help of paid petition-gatherers from another group, we couldn't achieve that goal. Our volunteers kept gathering petitions. We engaged MDW Communications to build the website for Single Member Districts. We had to decide whether we would aim to be on the ballot in the November, 2018 election or wait for a Special Election in March, 2019.

June 22, 2018 SAFE turned in the last batch of petitions needed to qualify our referendum. We held a press conference outside the front door of the Terrace building to announce that we go for the November, 2018 General Election ballot. However, in July, Kafi Benz of CONA warned that the BCC was also considering changing the petition requirements from 5% to 10% (15,000 to 30,000 petitions) for any future efforts and shortening the time to gather them.

August, 2018 the new website singlememberdistricts.com was launched.



August 16 was the Tiger Bay panel with Dan Lobeck and Hugh Culverhouse vs. Nora Patterson and John Wesley White. August 29 was the public hearing of the BCC to adopt the ordinance to place our amendment on the ballot. Our fundraising efforts continued to support a ground game to reach voters and digital advertising and postcard mailers to supplement the presentations Dan and Kindra were giving at various events, and the guest columns they were submitting to various newspapers. Sept. 14 Kindra did a livestream at Beef O'Brady's in North Port with Ruta Jouniari. September and October, 2018 more forums with Kindra and Dan at Holley Hall, and Selby Library.

November 6, 2018—The Midterm General Election! The Single Member Districts referendum passed with 59.84% YES, vs. 40.16% NO. A major victory! Unfortunately, the deceptively worded referendum by the County Commissioners also passed, that changed petition requirements to amend the County Charter in the future from 5% to 10% (15,000 to 30,000 petitions) and shortened the time for gathering petitions. It was obvious the County Commission wanted to silence the voices of the voters.

THE OPPOSITION

In March of 2018, Christine Robinson of the Argus Foundation learned the progress of SAFE's petition-gathering efforts at the Supervisor of Elections office and raised an alarm. Christian Ziegler sent an urgent e-blast to alert everyone and raise money for his campaign for County Commission District 2.

By May, guest columns from local developers and Republican Party Acting Chair Jack Brill were printed assailing the single member district effort.

At the August 16 Tiger Bay panel, Nora Patterson and John Wesley White opposed single member districts while Dan Lobeck and Hugh Culverhouse supported them.

September 18, 2018 the political committee **Stop! Stealing Our Votes** was formed. \$85,000 was raised initially from builder's groups, the Sarasota Chamber of Commerce, and led by the Argus Foundation that donated \$50,000. Stop! Stealing Our Votes signs were planted all over the county. Glossy mailers started being sent to voters countywide to oppose single member districts, from Political Ink, Inc. in Washington, DC. Digital media, online advertising, and a website were developed by Strategic Digital Services in Tallahassee. The developer-funded opposition mounted an aggressive and deceptive campaign both in mailers and social media, stealing SAFE's message by actually claiming that single member districts will increase the power of the big money developers.

Funds kept being raised in October for more digital ads and more mailers opposing Single member districts.

Altogether the opposition raised over \$155,000.00 to defeat our Single Member District referendum.

But they LOST at the November 6 election!

So in January, 2019 the County Commissioners started planning to redistrict the County in 2019 before the decennial census, to gerrymander County districts so they could keep control over this county, with the help of their developer and business friends and...the Argus Foundation.