

With the recent passage of North Carolina Session Law 2021-39, the North Carolina General Assembly amended the Charter of the Town of River Bend. The purpose of the amendment was to change the voting schedule for the office of Mayor and Council members. The River Bend Town Council consists of a Mayor and five Council members, all of which are elected to 4-year terms and on a staggered basis.

Historically, in North Carolina municipal elections have taken place in odd-numbered years (i.e. 2015, 2017, 2019, etc.). State and federal elections have taken place in even-numbered years (i.e. 2016, 2018, 2020, etc.). Following that schedule, the next municipal election in River Bend, and most every other municipality in the state, would have been in November, 2021. Since the change has taken place, the next municipal election in River Bend will now be in November, 2022. Thereafter, municipal elections will be held in even-numbered years (i.e. 2024, 2026, etc.).

That change presents an unusual circumstance for the current Mayor and Council members. Since their original terms were for four years, simply moving the election back one year without making other changes, would create a void in terms between elections. To address that circumstance, the General Assembly also extended the terms of the current Mayor and each current member of the Council by one year. Prior to the change, the Council seats held by Buddy Sheffield, Bud Van Slyke, Barbara Maurer and Don Fogle would have been on the ballot in November, 2021. It is important to note that the only reason the seat held by Barbara Maurer would have been on the ballot in 2021 is because she was appointed to that seat to fill a vacancy created by the resignation of Harry McClard. Had McClard not resigned, he would have held that seat until 2023 following his election in 2019.

It is important to remember, as stated above, that our Council members are elected to 4-year terms and also serve staggered terms. In a normal election cycle, that means that there is a municipal election every two years, but only for three members (half) of the Council. Under normal conditions, three Council members would have been elected in 2017 and serve until 2021. Then in 2019 the other two Council members plus the Mayor would have been elected and serve until 2023. That is how it works during normal election cycles. Over the past few years, the elections in River Bend have been abnormal due to three resignations from the Council since 2019. When there is a resignation, a new "special" election scenario goes into effect. In an attempt to avoid making it even more complicated, we will not address those "special" election scenarios in this article.

In order to keep the voting on a staggered term basis, the General Assembly extended the term of each current Council member by one year. Now, in November, 2022 the seats held by Buddy Sheffield, Bud Van Slyke, Barbara Maurer and Don Fogle will be on the ballot. The person that wins the seat currently held by Maurer will only hold that seat until 2024. The winners of the other three seats will hold those until 2026. The rest of the Council seats, which are currently held by Mayor John Kirkland and Council member Brian Leonard will be on the ballot in 2024, along with the winner of the special election in 2022 for the seat currently held by Maurer. The winners of these three seats will hold those seats until 2028.

In summary, there will be no municipal election in 2021. In 2022, four seats will be on the ballot. Three of those four will be for 4-year terms and end in 2026. One will be for a 2-year term and end in 2024. Then in 2024 there will be another municipal election for three seats. One of those seats will be for Mayor and the other two will be for Council members. All of those will be for 4-year terms and all will end in 2028. Then River Bend will be back on track with 4-year terms and evenly staggered elections.

In River Bend, the Town Council unanimously supported the change and sees it as a win-win situation for residents and voters. Additionally, every town in Craven County made the same move except Vanceboro and New Bern. New Bern is waiting for 2020 Census results to determine how their voting districts may be impacted. After that data has been released they may change to even-numbered elections years also.

Why the change? There are multiple benefits to moving elections to even-numbered years. One of the main benefits is cost savings. By law, municipal elections in North Carolina are administered by the Board of Elections within each County. Since that has historically been done in odd-numbered years, municipal offices were typically the only issue on the ballot. That meant that towns were paying the County for the full costs to administer their elections. Moving to even-numbered years will mean that the County will simply add the municipal seats to the election that they will already be conducting in even-numbered years. The towns will still be charged a fee to add their seats to the ballot but the cost will be reduced for each town. In River Bend it will likely save thousands of dollars in each election.

Another benefit is absentee voting. In the last election, the Town of River Bend did not offer absentee voting. Prior to these voting schedule changes, if the town chose to offer absentee voting, there would be an additional cost the town must pay to the County. Absentee voting is a requirement (not an option) during all state and federal elections. Therefore, the County will be offering absentee voting options for all municipal elections at no additional cost because they will already be offering it for state and federal elections. Another advantage is for the individual voter. Before the change, voters had to get out and vote in municipal elections in odd years and then get out to vote again in state/federal elections in even years. Now, elections will be combined with all voting done in even-numbered years.

Another possible advantage is improved voter turnout. The average voter turnout during the last three River Bend elections was less than 40%. Typically, turnout in municipal elections is less than that of state/federal elections. Moving municipal elections to even-numbered years should increase voter participation.

Delane Jackson, Town Manager