



OFFICE OF THE MAYOR

September 28, 2020

Hon. Kathy McBride and Members of City Council
City of Trenton
319 E. State St.
Trenton, NJ 08608

RE: A Letter Regarding Ordinance 20-51

Dear City Council,

The purpose of this letter is to state my position regarding Ordinance 20-51. Not only does the proposed ordinance lack sufficient information regarding the expected costs of a new election schedule or its impact on voter turnout, it also fails to include a mechanism for residents to participate in this significant decision, namely, through a referendum.

First, it is necessary to evaluate the costs of a revised municipal election schedule, which is not alluded to in Ordinance 20-51, on the agenda docket for the City Council meeting from September 17, 2020, and entitled “An Ordinance of the City of Trenton, County of Mercer, State of New Jersey to Change the Election Date of the Non-Partisan Regular Municipal Election From the Second Tuesday in May to the Date of the November General Election Commencing in the Year 2022.” In 1961, and nearly 60 years ago, a charter study commission led Trenton voters to adopt the current municipal voting system.

It is clear that our municipal election system should be evaluated and compared with alternatives, but the City of Trenton, under the proposed ordinance, would still have to pay for a run-off election in December; moreover, because City Council has moved to shift the election of ward council members to two years after the mayor and at-large council members are chosen, the city would have to pay for ward run-off elections in December of the ward election years. This means that instead of reducing the number of elections that the City of Trenton is responsible for running, we would increase the number of elections. In an effort to promote full transparency, residents shouldn't be surprised by this consequence of the proposed ordinance, and most Trentonians are unaware of this fact.

Second, the most crucial consideration in any reform made to our municipal election schedule is to determine whether the proposed ordinance is likely to increase voter turnout. While it is possible that reliance on mail-in ballots, with voters deciding to vote from home, can offset hazardous weather conditions that voters might face in December, the city would be required to pay for the cost of mailing out 40,000 ballots, pay the postage for the 15,000 ballots that are mailed back, and pay to open a set number of polling places for voters deciding to vote in-person. The decision to do this should be guided by municipal best practices: We can and should guide our decisions by what has worked in other municipalities.

Two suburban towns in Mercer County, with nonpartisan forms, switched their elections to November over the past decade. It is my understanding that City Council has not analyzed the success or failure of these changes, nor has City Council outlined the metrics that would make their proposed ordinance a success and made this information public. Both municipalities in Mercer County filled three seats on their township councils last fall. If there has been a statistically significant increase in voter turnout based on these changes, this will support a decision to switch our elections to November; however, if there is not a relevant increase in voter turnout based on their changes, this makes the cost of the proposed municipal election schedule an event more important factor. Of the 9,058 voters who voted in the May 2018 election, 99% voted for a candidate for mayor, 90% voted for a ward council candidate, but over 25% of those voters who came to the polls didn't vote for *any* of the at-large candidates for council. 46% of those voters' potential council-at-large votes were left blank. This is the significant problem in Trenton's municipal elections, which Ordinance 20-51 does nothing to address.

Finally, if we would like to improve voter turnout and civic participation, this ordinance should be expanded and support its establishment as a referendum. Just as a charter study commission recommended Mayor-Council Plan C to improve accountability over the 1915 city commission, today's residents deserve a robust vision for a change in municipal elections. No attention has been paid to whether partisan elections or permitting candidates to run on a slate would be preferable to residents or increase total votes cast. Through a referendum, residents could be given clear information on the expected costs of a new municipal election scheme as well as data to support whether how it would impact voter turnout. Ultimately, a decision that might affect how residents elect their representatives for several decades should be decided by the voters themselves, especially when it will extend the terms of current elected officials. I do not support extending my own term without the consent of voters.

Residents in the City of Trenton do not need piecemeal voting reform, they need comprehensive voting reform that seeks to improve voter turnout whilst reducing costs on our taxpayer-funded elections. We can do this through a comprehensive reviewal of the expected costs and changes in voter turnout, and we ought to let the voters make the final decision through a referendum.

Very truly yours,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'W. Reed Gusciora', with a stylized flourish at the end.

W. Reed Gusciora
Mayor