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## Time for districts

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AT TYBEE Island's first city council meeting of 2008, Councilman Dick Smith fulfilled a campaign promise when he rolled out a proposal to change the way city leaders are elected.

But that proposal needs tweaking.

At present, all candidates for city council run in a single at-large race, with the top six vote-getters winning seats.

While Mr. Smith would maintain at-large voting, he wants to split the race into six seats or posts. That means all voters on Tybee Island would vote in all six races.

But instead of electing the top six vote-getters in a free for all, challengers would target seats held by specific incumbents.

"If someone opposed what I stand for on council, then I'm opening myself up for someone to run against me, particularly," the newly elected council member said.

Mr. Smith said the more targeted races would help avoid "the fruit-basket turnover that we had in the last election."

But because his proposal does not address council members' election schedule, all seats would still come up for re-election every two years. That means a lack of continuity could continue.

What's more, Councilman Paul Wolff worries the plan would result in political shenanigans, with challengers recruited to run against a single incumbent.

That's a valid concern. Mr. Wolff was targeted by pro-development forces for his stance on protecting the environment.

He is the last remaining, hard-core environmentalist left on the council after last year's election.

Also in November, voters on the island turned down a measure that would have lengthened the term of office of all council seats to four years, with elections for half the seats coming up in alternating two-year cycles.

The measure failed, probably because its intended effect was not adequately communicated to voters. That's unfortunate.

Longer terms would give Tybee council members more time to learn the issues; alternating elections could preserve institutional memory.

Tybee voters should also consider another alternative when residents come together for a public hearing on the issue on Jan. 24 - splitting the island into three council districts.

The district voters could elect representatives from their given areas. Voters island-wide could still choose among candidates for three at-large posts.

Councilman Smith says Tybee is too small for districts. But according to the latest Census, the city of 3,800 people boasts 400 more residents than Port Wentworth, which established voting districts last year.

Voting districts would preclude a council made up of residents of a single section of the city. District candidates would be more closely tied their constituents.

Such a plan would also give residents more voting power: An unresponsive council member could be replaced by district voters - a much more difficult process for at-large members.

If Tybee residents decide to change the way they elect their leaders, it will require a change in the city charter. That, in turn, will require the General Assembly's approval, followed by a public referendum, probably at the November General Election to avoid extra polling costs.

Mayor Jason Buelterman said Tybee residents are leery of changes to the voting process.

That's understandable. But residents should keep an open mind.

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