

Mayor lauds election changes

To the editor:

The Rockville mayor and council recently conducted public hearings on a series of bills to bring major reform to the way Rockville conducts city elections.

This legislation is a result of the comprehensive study done by Rockville's Election Task Force, appointed by the mayor and council in late 1985 to review and strengthen the city's election laws.

Opening up government and encouraging greater citizen participation are things I deeply believe in, and the Election Task Force report is one more example of how we are planning for Rockville's future. Here are the major recommendations:

1. The end of dual registration—Maryland is one of only four states that allow municipalities, such as Rockville, to require that voters register separately for city elections. Not only is this cumbersome, it is undemocratic.

People are understandably confused about a system that lets them register once for county, state and federal elections and insists they register again to elect their mayor and council.

I called for single registration in my campaign two years ago and have gone to Annapolis twice since my election to testify on bills that would abolish dual registration—most recently, just last week.

Groups such as the NAACP, the League of Women Voters and the Governor's Task Force on Voter

Participation have also called for an end to this outmoded system. Whether the General Assembly acts or not, Rockville will make it easier for its citizens to participate in the process—to vote.

2. Strict campaign reporting requirements—Rockville's current election law is extremely lax in both campaign spending limits and the reporting of campaign contributions. In fact, it was only because I volunteered to do so prior to the last city election that the voters saw what all the candidates had raised—city law does not currently require candidate reports until after elections.

The task force report is clear and concise on this matter.

It sets up specific procedures for appointing a campaign treasurer and what that treasurer must do. Besides handling campaign contributions, the treasurer will file reports with the city twice before the election, and then 30 days after.

In addition, the limits on campaign contributions that currently exist in state law will be adopted by the city—\$2,500 from a group, association or PAC and \$1,000 from an individual.

3. Enhanced ethics standards—During the last campaign, charges and countercharges flew about campaign ethics and tactics. Some candidates are already dredging up the last campaign as if to make it their issue for election this year.

I believe we should put an

end to replaying 1985 and focus on what we can do to make this election free of any offensive behavior. The Election Task Force agrees with me. They suggest a Fair Campaign Practices Commission, which would monitor compliance with election laws and act to resolve any complaints of unfair campaign practices.

In addition, all candidates and campaign chairmen will sign an expanded Fair Campaign Practice Agreement. This will put all public officials on notice that unethical behavior during an election will never be tolerated in Rockville.

Other recommendations by the task force include stiff fines (up to \$1,000) or a jail term of up to a year for violating election laws; full disclosure by candidates of all financial interests; and increasing voter participation by preparing a voters' guide and sponsoring candidates' debates.

Rockville's Election Task Force report is so thorough that it is quickly becoming a model for other jurisdictions.

In particular, the members of the General Assembly have expressed interest in using our report as they grapple with changes in state election law. We should be proud that Rockville is recognized for its leadership in the area of government reform.

I am determined that this year's Rockville elections will be the finest the city has ever seen.

Steven Van Grack
Mayor, Rockville