



Fox Point files

by Douglas H. Frazer

The Fox Point Caucus

Every four years much attention is focused on the Iowa caucuses. Citizens show up to a meeting (caucus) and after some speech giving and discussion, cast votes for the candidates. From Fox Point's incorporation in 1926 through 1991 this was, in form, the method our village used to select municipal candidates for the April general ballot. Fox Point was a holdover. Shorewood, Whitefish Bay, and Greendale had abandoned the caucus system in favor of primary elections in the early 1950s, Bayside by village board action on October 5, 1967.

State law had long permitted, and still permits, municipalities -- through local ordinance -- to place candidates for the general election ballot through the caucus system. Wis. Stat. § 8.05. The caucus is open to the public, but only qualified electors of the municipality may nominate and vote for candidates. A person is not required to be a registered voter in order to participate. The village president along with the municipal clerk conducts the caucus. Nominations are made, and seconded, for each office that will appear on the spring ballot. For each office, an elector is entitled to vote for one candidate. The two candidates who receive the highest number of votes are nominated and certified to the municipal clerk.

The caucus was modeled after the classic New England town hall meetings, where concerned citizens -- participating in democracy first-hand -- would debate the merits of each candidate. In theory, caucuses are meant to occasion nominat-

ing speeches in which the issues are laid out before a respectable turnout of the citizenry. In practice, few tend to show up.

The system, still in use by many Wisconsin villages and towns, seems to work reasonably well when the population is small. In Waukesha County, for instance, the villages of Merton and Lac La Belle still hold caucuses. As Tom Nelson, the long-time Merton village clerk (and former trustee) observes, the system allows for a block of electors to attend the caucus on a surprise basis and "pack" the meeting. The block can thus command enough votes to insure only its candidates, and no others, are on the general ballot. This kind of intrigue appears to occur only rarely, however. The more general complaint is that as the population increases the system feels outdated.

Fox Point historically held its caucus the last Tuesday in January. Participation was light. At the high end, maybe 100 people would attend. At the low end, excluding village personnel and individuals either making nominations or standing as candidates, as few as 4 "regular" citizens might participate.

For years, civic activist Norman Gill campaigned to end the caucus. (Gill was the long time executive director of the Citizens Governmental Research Bureau, now the Public Policy Forum.)

Gill argued that the caucus was almost always poorly attended, and the candidates traditionally did not use the occasion to discuss the issues. Gill was right: candidates often ran unopposed and were seldom

pressed to present their views. "I have faith in the democratic process," Gill stated. "There is a greater opportunity to express oneself in a primary system."

Interest in abandoning the caucus coalesced in 1991 in the run-up to the recall election of the village board president and four trustees. The recall had been ignited by the perceived mishandling of a financial settlement given to the recently cashiered chief of police.

"Changes in our society have caused people to show less interest and less participation in local government and specifically in something like attending a caucus," stated Attorney Richard Cutler. "So the residents, in practice, have made it obsolete."

This sentiment was seconded by resident Harold Wolfe. "The caucus system is willfully outmoded," stated Wolfe. "The procedure just isn't as democratic and as inviting as it could be for aspiring office holders."

The fall of 1991 was a time of change in Fox Point. On September 24, 1991, the village board unanimously voted to replace the caucus with a primary system to nominate candidates



for general elections. "It's been here since 1926, and we took care of it in five minutes," stated Jerome Hardt, village board president.

Hardt had hit on the season's political theme, but it played out differently than he would have liked. In the recall election on November 19, 1991, residents, not to put too fine a point on it, "took care of" Hardt. He was voted out of office in favor of Mark B. Pollack -- who assumed the office of village president with 61 percent of the vote.

Douglas H. Frazer is a trustee on the Fox Point Village board. The views expressed are his own and not necessarily those of the village, the village board, other village board members, or Neighborhood Communications, LLC.



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