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War of words begins over ballot question in Sea Isle City

By TRUDI GILFILLIAN Staff Writer, (609) 463-6716

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SEA ISLE CITY — Voters here will decide this November whether the city's three-member commission should be replaced by a five member council and mayor.

But while a petition to have the question placed on the ballot was successful, petition organizer John Fee said he opposes the way the question will be presented to voters.

The ballot question, approved at a special City Commission meeting Wednesday, explains that a yes vote means the government will expand to six members “plus an administrator and an additional lawyer. This government expansion will increase the city budget by up to \$475,000 per year. As a result, the increase in the tax rate will be up to 1.34 cents.”

Voters are then told a no vote means the government will not change “and there will be no additional costs to the city.”

Fee said he estimated the cost of the change would be about \$150,000 to \$200,000, and he argues that expense could be offset by more efficient government operations.

“They've said a yes vote is an automatic increase in taxes,” Fee said Thursday. According to a chart supplied by the city, the additional cost is the maximum amount it expects expenses will increase under a mayor-council form of government.

The city anticipates those increases would include a \$20,000 salary for the mayor, \$10,000 salaries for each council member, an administrator's salary of \$120,000, an administrator's assistant with a salary of \$40,000 and an additional attorney for the council at a cost of \$25,000.

The city also anticipated the cost of health benefits for all those individuals to come to \$228,663. Increases in social security payments and other expenses are also factored in the city's estimates.

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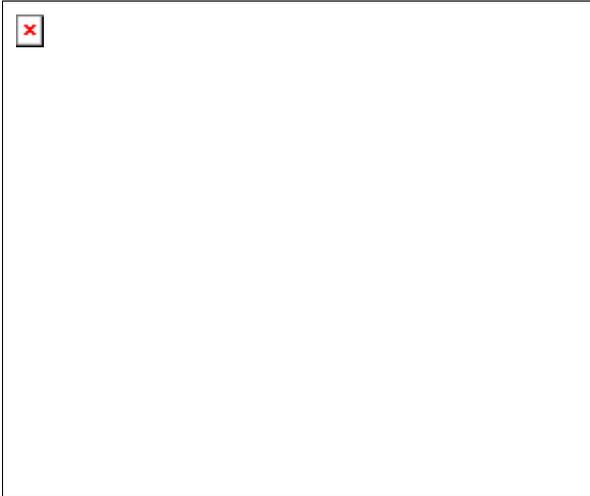
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Fee said the city offered no explanation for the increases, and he called the commission's wording an attempt to intimidate voters.

He said he will pursue his objection to the wording with County Clerk Rita Fulginiti, who oversees the county's elections.

Meanwhile, Mayor Leonard Desiderio said Thursday that Sea Isle City is a small community with about 2,500 voters and with no need for a bigger government.

"I am definitely voting no," Desiderio said, adding the expense of the change would waste taxpayer money.

Desiderio said he believes the effort to change the community's government is the result of residual sour grapes over Fee's defeat in the May 2005 commission election.

Desiderio, mayor here since 1993, and his fellow incumbents, James R. Iannone and Angela Dalrymple, were all returned to office in that election.

The question for the organizers is, 'If they'd been successful in the election, would they have pursued a change in government,'" Desiderio said.

Desiderio said the city's tax rate is the third lowest in the county, just behind Avalon and Stone Harbor.

Fee, however, said Avalon and Stone Harbor also have the form of government he hopes to bring to Sea Isle City.

According to the county tax administrator's office, Sea Isle City's total tax rate is 61 cents per \$100 of assessed property valuation. Of that amount, the local purpose tax, used to run the city, is 26.3 cents.

The ballot question will be voted on during the general election Nov. 7.

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