

“At Large” or District Voting for The Incorporated Town of Keystone

Question: Should the Keystone Charter select voting by district or at large?

Factors used in determining the decision:

The issue of whether voting in Keystone should take place by district or “at large” has been seriously examined and reviewed. In addition to reviewing the Charter of other towns in Summit County and towns of similar size throughout the state of Colorado, the commission sought input from the Keystone community at the first Town Hall meeting. Due to the number of people at the Town Hall who suggested voting by district rather than “at large”, the Commission undertook further consideration of the issue. The Commission held an extensive discussion of the topic during the Mayor/Town Manager forum, which included the Mayor of Dillon, Town Managers of Frisco and Mountain Village and the Executive Director of the Northwest Colorado Council of Government. The Keystone Election Commission Chair who has extensive experience in handling elections both in Colorado and Virginia also provided input and perspective.

Pro’s of Voting by District:

Election by District should provide the town council member(s) from each district with a better understanding of, and support for, the the needs of the district. It also improves the likelihood the individual constituents will know council member(s) from their own district and provide them with a better opportunity for advocacy for individual issues. In addition, it will decrease the campaigning cost of election for candidates since they will have a smaller number of constituents to reach.

The Colorado State Constitution requires each district to have the same population of residents; it is not based on the number of registered voters.

Pro’s of Voting “At Large”:

Factors that favor voting “at large include”: Keystone is already a small community and “at large” voting allows for a broader pool of candidates, minimizes the risk there will not be a candidate interested in a particular seat, facilitates coordinating elections with the county clerk and consequently decreases overall election costs, and minimizes the risk of pockets of isolation of one small community or rivalry between 2 groups. In addition, Keystone does not have sufficient demographic information on which to divide the community into meaningful districts.

As stated above, after the Town Hall where a number of people suggested voting by district, the Charter Commission reconsidered this issue and conducted more thorough research and analysis on the issue.

The reasons that most small towns, like Keystone, do not select this method for elections are multiple. An election by district is more complex to administer than “at large” requiring the printing of a number of different ballots which adds to the complexity of administering the election, the expense of the election and the possibility for mistakes. It also means Keystone would need to develop its own election administration in addition to working with the county clerk.

In addition, Keystone does not have the data necessary to divide itself into districts. The Keystone population is estimated at 1278 residents. There is no data which breaks out where these residents live. Keystone currently has slightly less than 1,000 registered voters. If these voters were aligned with the population, dividing those voters into 6 districts would mean less than 170 voters per district, i.e. 86 votes is a majority. However, in some areas a much higher percentage of the population are registered voters than in others. This would result in some districts potentially having significantly less registered voters than others. Voter turnout in comparably sized towns is often small, possibly as low as 20%, which would mean that Town Council members could be elected by an even smaller number of voters (possibly 17) and could lead to potential manipulation or other mischief. There are many court cases on this subject. In addition, in the case of new construction, the district divisions could quickly become outdated to such an extent they no longer pass constitutional requirements.

An additional serious concern is finding a candidate in each of these small districts who is qualified and willing to serve on Town Council. Also there is a greater risk of Balkanization/divisiveness between areas or groups which is not productive in a town of this size.

Charter Commission Decision:

A review of the pros and cons of "at large" voting vs district voting, especially in a small community, indicates that district voting has far more negatives than at large. For these reasons, the Charter Commission has selected at large voting.

The Commission recognized that once detailed, demographic information about where in Keystone residents live is available and building in Keystone levels off, there may be a desire by the residents and a future Town Council to establish districts. Consequently, the Charter provides the power to a future town council to establish districts by Town Ordinance.

For those who want someone who understands the unique needs of their neighborhood to be represented on the Town Council, the recommendation is to recruit a member of the neighborhood to run for Town council then fully support their candidacy. In Dillon, which elects town council members "at large", often less than 100 votes will win the election for a candidate.

For additional information regarding the "Pros and Cons" of at large vs district voting, please review the information on the Incorporate Keystone website.