

*I sent this letter to the Council back in 2003 when they were considering a change in terms of office from two years to four-year staggered terms. The Council asked residents to address feedback on the potential change to the Town Manager. This was before I was elected and before I even seriously considered running. I will say the Council's changing their terms and failure to hold many of their monthly regular meetings did help motivate me to run when I did. Though after I joined the Council I found out not everything was as perfect with Southern Pines as I thought it was, I would write pretty much the same letter today. I still believe the Southern Pines Council should serve for two-year terms.*

Chris Smithson  
920 North Saylor St.  
Southern Pines, NC 28387

Kyle Sonnenberg, Town Manager  
Town of Southern Pines, NC

March 31, 2003

Dear Mr. Sonnenberg,

Recently, the Council and the Pilot have suggested that the terms of office for Southern Pines' elected officials be changed from two to four years. The reasons given so far for making this change to the town's charter are not compelling enough to necessitate change to a system that has been so successful over the years. There is very little danger of chaos in the unlikely event that the whole council is replaced at one time. In addition, there is little burden on the incumbent and a great benefit to the voter when elections come around every two years.

One reason given for extending terms is so that council members are not "running for re-election all the time." Running for re-election in Southern Pines is not a terribly difficult, drawn-out or even particularly expensive endeavor. The window for filing to run for council or mayor is open for about a month and closes three months before Election Day. Unlike Presidential elections, in which candidates start campaigning three or more years ahead of time, the typical town office campaign is more like three months. Once in office, the incumbent is almost guaranteed that if they don't really mess up, they'll be re-elected easily and with almost no opposition. In the last election, the mayor ran unopposed and there were not even enough challengers for council seats to replace all the council members even if the voters wanted all the incumbents out. The hardest task in a Southern Pines election is that of a challenger coming up with a compelling reason why they should be elected to replace a member of a council, which has run the town so well. Regarding expenses, there are enough public forums for a council candidate, especially an incumbent, that one does not need to spend a great deal of money on a campaign.

Another of the arguments for changing the terms is that voters could "clean house" one year leaving no experienced members in office and therefore creating a council with no

idea of how to govern the town. Besides the fact that a 100% turnover in one election is very unlikely, this fear of an uneducated council is mostly unfounded. For one, as important as the council's job is, it's not a technically difficult job to do. Any interested candidate can learn a large percentage of the job just by attending council meetings and workshops. Various procedures and rules of order are pretty easy to understand. Most of the legal and technical issues are actually handled by the town manager and town attorney. The Institute of Government at UNC holds a school for newly elected mayors and council members, which helps a lot with those things not so easily picked up by attending council meetings. While every part of a council member's job is not as easy as raising one's hand, a motivated incoming member can come into office pretty well prepared without having previously served. How would anyone be elected to any public office if not having had that position before makes them an extreme liability?

The benefit of keeping terms at the traditional two years is that it holds our elected officials more accountable for their actions. When the voters of Southern Pines can make their voices heard every two years, officials are less likely to stray from their promises early in their terms and hope it will be forgotten a few years later when it's election time again. Local elected officials can affect our daily lives more rapidly and directly than most other levels of government. Therefore, it's only right for citizens to have a more frequent and direct say as to who is in city hall and what they are doing.

Many agree that Southern Pines has been extremely well run for a very long time. This is because the people of the town, whether they are the voters or the officials they put in office, understand the town's needs and continually work towards a successful future. Not only is there no need to change the town charter, it's somewhat insulting to it's citizens to hint at a potential for making rash choices when it comes to electing (or re-electing) town officials. Taxes have gone up before. Water rates have gone up before. The people didn't flush out the council. This is because everyone knew that they were doing their very best to make Southern Pines its very best. The current system has worked well for many years and there are no real, compelling reasons to change it. Keeping the people's right to be heard as frequently as possible, however, is a very compelling reason to leave things just as they are. Finally, the Pilot mentions that the governments of Moore County, Pinehurst, and Aberdeen are among the bodies serving 4-year terms. Southern Pines is not the County, Pinehurst, or Aberdeen. I choose to live in Southern Pines because I like the way it is, where it's going, and how it does things. Southern Pines is the best. Please don't mess it up.

Sincerely,

Chris Smithson

Cc: The Pilot