What’s at stake in fight on how a county votes

By Taneyan Joyner | tjoyner@ajc.com

Two months from now, U.S. District Judge Timothy Bartlett Sr. will revisit a case looking at how Fayette County elects its leaders. He’ll hear arguments for and against at-large voting. The NAACP Legal Defense Fund, on behalf of 10 black Fayette residents, says district voting would be a better way to elect representatives. They say at-large elections dilute minority voting strength. But county officials want to stick with at-large, or countywide, voting. They argue that politics—not race—have kept black residents from getting elected to county office in the heavily Republican county.

THE CASE

Advocates for district voting say over the years at-large elections are essentially discriminatory. They argue that Fayette’s history and past voting patterns have made it hard for black residents to get elected to county-wide positions on the county commission and school board. They also say racially polarized voting exists in Fayette. They cite last fall’s election as a more equitable election process. That election involved district voting for the first time, which led to Tyrone resident Pera Coston becoming Fayette’s first black county commissioner. Coston was elected to District 5, the mostly black district created from Bartron’s 2012 order, which replaced at-large voting with district voting.

County officials argue that while Fayette has a large number of black residents in the northern part of the county, they are not a majority and thus not large enough to create a mostly minority district. The only way to get a majority is to go across the top of the county and into Tyrone, which is what Bartlett did in drawing the district map. County officials say that amounts to racial gerrymandering.

THE BACKGROUND

There are few at-large voting systems left in Georgia. Since 1982, virtually all of the nearly 100 challenges to at-large systems in Georgia have been successful, experts say. In 2013, Bar-
tett ruled, without a trial, in favor of district voting and Coston was elected in November to the District 5 seat. County officials appealed that ruling, and the appeals court ruled that Bartlett had to reconsider the issue after a trial. That trial started Nov. 15.

In the meantime, Coston died in July. County officials determined that because of the appeal, the special election to replace her should be held under at-large voting. That decision was challenged. Bartlett ruled in favor of advocates for district voting, and the Sept. 15 special election to pick a successor for Coston will be declared by District 5 voters only.
Three vie for Fayette seat

By Tammy Joyner
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Three candidates are vying for the Fayette County Commission District 5 seat left vacant by the July 3 death of Pote Coston. The special election will be held Sept. 15. Early voting is underway and ends Friday. The seat recently became a point of controversy when county officials said it would be filled using at-large, or countywide, voting. But NAACP officials balked at the idea. Fayette has been in a four-year fight with the civil rights organization and a group of black residents who say at-large voting is discriminatory and keeps black people from being able to fully participate in the political process in Fayette.

The NAACP went to court to force the county to use district voting, the method used last year to elect Coston. A judge recently ruled that district voting would be used to decide Coston's successor. But the issue of how Fayette elects its county leaders is far from settled. The two sides will present their argument about at-large voting in court Nov. 16. In the meantime, here's a brief look at the District 5 candidates:

**ANGELA BEAN**

**Age:** 58  
**Residence:** Fayetteville  
**Job:** Independent graphic artist  
**Political affiliation:** Republican

**Reason for running:** "I am a 32-year resident of north Fayette County with a long history of community involvement and also a proven champion for good government. I felt it was time to run for this position to better serve my fellow citizens."

**Details:** www.angelabea.com

**PEYTON RILEY**

**Age:** 48  
**Residence:** Fayetteville  
**Job:** Sells insurance and investments for Dyche Wealth Management in Fayetteville.

**Political affiliation:** Signed up with the Republican Party shortly after he qualified to run for office.  
**Reason for running:** "I've lived in this community for 16 years, and I want to make sure the growth of the community is done in a smart way by attracting businesses that would bring back our children who were educated in this county and enable them to put down roots in this county."

**Details:** www.facebook.com/FayetteCountyCommissioner

**CHARLES ROUSSEAU**

**Age:** 54  
**Residence:** the northeastern part of unincorporated Fayette County  
**Job:** Retired assistant director of administration in the Fulton County government's General Services Department.

**Political affiliation:** Democrat

**Reason for running:** "I want to provide a higher level of service to residents of the county. Those services include enhance senior citizen services, recreational amenities and services. I also want to ensure public safety-related issues stay high and visibility stays high in our neighborhoods. I also want to help attract new economic development."

**Details:** www.roussaudistrict5.com