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Will cash prizes get voters to polls?

L.A. ethics panel floats the idea as a solution to the city's low election turnouts.

BY DAVID ZAHNISER

Alarmed that fewer than one-fourth of voters are showing up for municipal elections, the Los Angeles Ethics Commission voted Thursday to recommend that the City Council look at using cash prizes to lure more people to the polls.

On a 3-0 vote, the panel advised City Council President Herb Wesson's Rules, Elections and Intergovernmental Relations Committee to seriously consider the use of financial incentives and a random drawing during its elections, possibly as soon as next year.

Depending on the source of city funds, the idea could require a ballot measure. Commissioners said they were unsure how big the prizes should be or how many should be offered, and that a pilot program should first be used to test the concept.

"Maybe it's \$25,000, maybe it's \$50,000," Commission President Nathan Hochman said. "That's where the pilot program comes in — to figure out what ... number and amount of prizes would actually get people to the voting box."

Only 23% of registered voters cast ballots in last year's mayoral election, prompting civic leaders to suggest an array of solutions. On Tuesday, turnout in a special school board election fell below 10%, according to preliminary numbers.

The idea of an election day lottery came up Thursday during an appearance by Wesson before the commission. During that discussion, Hochman suggested that surplus matching funds

— money provided to candidates who agree to certain spending restrictions — could cover the cost of election day prizes.

That dialogue with Wesson, Hochman said, spurred the commission to act a few hours later.

"When I heard that he really wants to consider this and was enthused and excited about this out-of-the-box idea, I thought, 'Let's get an action item before his committee,'" Hochman said.

Wesson said he was indeed intrigued by the idea of a drawing or lottery but would first want to hear what neighborhood councils, his colleagues and assorted "legal beagles" think about the idea.

"I can't wait to have this conversation," he said. "But don't get me wrong. Don't think I'm going to run around being the poster child" for the proposal.

The commission's vote comes as Los Angeles political leaders examine various proposals for getting more people to the polls. A citizens commission formed by Wesson and Mayor Eric Garcetti recommended two months ago that the city boost turnout by moving its elections from odd- to even-numbered years.

The Los Angeles 2020 Commission, another panel convened by Wesson, offered a similar recommendation in April.

Still, a move to even-numbered years could take several years because it would probably require turning over the city's election operations to the Los Angeles County registrar-recorder/county clerk. The changeover won't be possible until the county adopts a new voting system, city officials said.

Ethics Commissioner Jessica Levinson, an attorney and professor at Loyola Law School, said the city should not have to wait until the end of the decade to take steps to improve voter participation.

"We have turnout in citywide elections in the high teens and low 20s, and I think that's pretty dismal," she said.

Federal law prohibits people from accepting payment in exchange for voting. But Levinson, who voted to pursue the lottery concept, said that statute would not apply in an election in which there are no federal positions on the ballot.

California law prohibits people from using money or gifts to ensure that voters cast ballots for any particular person or measure. Money also cannot be used to keep people from voting in a particular election, according to information provided by the secretary of state's office.

Hochman said an election day lottery would simply require that people enter the voting booth, not cast a particular vote.

"If they truly think there are no good candidates, we're not going to force them" to choose one, he said. "What the studies have shown is, if you get people to the voting booths and they're being incentivized to be there ... over time they will vote for someone." david.zahniser

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