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The Last Say

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What were you doing on Tuesday, November 4th? My guess is you probably had a full day of classes, then just went home and collapsed. Or maybe you spent the day working on an English presentation or philosophy paper. And what about Tuesday, December 2nd? Again, I bet you were wrapped up in one of the vastly important activities vital to your collegiate life. While I’m not sure where you were on either of those Tuesdays, let me tell you where you weren’t. You weren’t at the polls voting in the city council elections. Pathetic. Or perhaps apathetic is a better word. Regardless of how it’s phrased, the student turnout at the polls for the recent city council election was terrible. Just 6.4\% of registered voters from the ages of 18 to 24 cast ballots on November 4th. Unfortunately, this didn’t come as a surprise to much of the Ames community.

Over the past 18 months, students have felt targeted by the city. The city council has eliminated the great college staple that is a couch on the front lawn and restricted the types of drink specials bars can offer. The city also started enforcing a long ignored occupancy ordinance in the middle of last year’s rent term, lest students continue the horrific practice of occupying all the bedrooms in a house and saving money by splitting rent payments among more people. Throw in the parking ticket price increase (since Campustown is where most tickets are handed out) and the sales tax increase (which we could have voted against, but nonetheless funds a middle school that will never benefit us), Every action taken by the city seemed to negatively impact students.

And the student body was collectively pissed. The topic of how the city was screwing us came up in conversations in the dorms, in class, even as we were drinking our now-more-expensive drinks at the bars. The city’s leaders weren’t considering students in their decisions, and we were suffering as a result. The logical solution was to get registered and vote for candidates who would represent our interests. With the students making up over half of the population of Ames, we could wield a lot of political power if we made it to the polls.

But we didn’t. Forget about the 118\% increase in student voting over the council election in 2001. The bottom line is less than one out of every 15 students voted. So much for wielding political power. Not that the city was surprised by students not making it to the polls. It’s this kind of apathy that has encouraged the city to take action without considering the student perspective in the first place.

Despite our failure as voters, the new city council’s composition will be more student-friendly than it used to be. Students got a break when Matthew Goodman won the run-off election. He should bring a fresh, much-needed perspective to the council because of his interaction with the student body. And we’ll also continue to have an ex officio student representative who, while still not possessing a vote, will look at each council proposition with the students in mind.

Basically, we missed our chance in these past elections. We could have single-handedly picked the newest members of the city council, but it appears complaining is as far as students are willing to go to enact change in Ames. Despite this critical mistake, we now have a new face on the council with some commitment to the student body. Now we just have to be committed to taking some action ourselves. Let’s not remain politically silent when it comes to the actions the city is taking. Go to a council meeting and ensure the members are at least hearing the student side of every issue. Our opinions only matter when we’re committed enough to back them up.