

## **The Case for Single Member Districts**

Austin is the fourth largest city in Texas and the 16th largest city in the U.S. It is the only city of this size to still, almost desperately, hang on to the 'At Large' system of City Council representation. Our School Board Representatives, County Commissioners, House and Senate Representatives are all selected under a district system. It is time for Austin to do the same, by devising a plan that is sensitive to long standing geographic and neighborhood boundaries.

Our current 'at large' system was devised in 1953. One of the key unspoken reasons for this change was to ensure Blacks and Hispanics would not have a representative on the council. Before 1953 we had single member districts. As the Civil Rights movement and Supreme Court Rulings began to unravel overt racist governmental policies, cities across the U.S. changed to 'at large' systems to maintain the status quo and continue to deny representation and voting rights to the Black and Hispanic minority community. Austin's "Gentleman's Agreement" established in 1969, designated Place 5 as the Mexican Council Seat, and Place 6 the Negro Council Seat. This so called "gentleman's agreement" averted federal enforcement of the Voting Rights Act of 1965 for the last 39 years, but it is still unrepresentative. It is a relic of our racist past, and it must be placed in the dust bin of history.

### **We the "Citizens for Restructuring Austin City Council"**

Believe we need local district representation, not necessarily racially designated districts. We had three very good Black candidates vying for the single "place 6" seat on the council in the last election. In this "post racial" era there is a high probability that more than one could have won in a district race system. Minority representation is best served by establishing coalitions within our racially mixed neighborhoods. We can elect Blacks and Hispanics to the council if we are willing to promote the best of our people under a more representative, manageable and equitable local district system.

Single member districts can have even more far-reaching effects than simply guaranteeing racial or ethnic mix on city councils. First, candidates in a district election will get acquainted with their constituents and try to ensure that the district voter's interests are represented. Second, single member districts will produce greater voter turnout than at-large systems making the electoral process more competitive. Third, the cost savings of running election campaigns alone would foster more grass roots candidates as well as participants.

It is very apparent to all that have dealt with 'City Hall' over the last 50 years that the Council has increasingly become disconnected from the community in practically every quadrant of the city. Even the richest neighborhoods are getting overwhelmed by the giant condo Tsunami that is consuming this city. The City Council's policies towards East Austin and many other neighborhoods have

demonstrated their unconcern and even arrogance. Our neighborhood plans are no longer agreements between the city and the neighborhoods. They are considered no more than guidelines that the City may ignore. Neighborhood initiatives and ideas are ignored or quashed with little consideration. The Council does not see the intrinsic value of East Austin or any other neighborhood community. The only value they protect vigorously is appraised value. The “Good Old Boy System” still exists but it is time for a change. That change is the opportunity to increase a basic human and civil right called representation!

Last month the ad hoc group of community activists from across the city (Citizens for Restructuring the Austin City Council) recommended a super district model based on the system in Memphis, TN. 8 single-member seats, 4 at-large seats (two members from each of two super districts.), and 1 mayor, for a total of 13 council members (See map attached). In this model, each member elected from a single-member district would represent about 80,000 people, which is small enough to assure substantial minority representation and accountability. The four members elected from the super districts would each represent about 325,000 people, which is large enough to require a citywide perspective but small enough to allow a greater range of candidates to conduct a reasonable campaign. The mayor, of course, would still be elected by the entire city. Every voter could vote for four council representatives: one member from the voter's district, two members from the super district, and the mayor. The ad hoc committee tried to follow natural boundaries (including the unnatural but permanent IH35) and neighborhood configurations. It is important to stress that this is a grassroots initiative and we are looking for the City to follow our lead, not undermine or dismiss it.

Local district representation is the future of political representation for our city. We need a progressive system of citizen participation in government. Representation by a member from our own district is the fundamental principle of republican government. Our council members can no longer just represent the few who contribute money to their campaigns. We should have council members from our own neighborhoods that can assure us of direct and fair representation. Local district representation will give all of our neighborhoods a chance to survive and a chance for this city to save its soul.