

Austin Neighborhoods Council
Minutes of the General Meeting
City Hall – Council Chambers
301 W 2nd Street
January 23, 2008
7:00pm to 9:00pm

7:00pm Call to Order and Introductions: Voting cards were passed out to representatives of member organizations in good standing

7:10pm Restructuring Austin City Council

City Council Member Sheryl Cole explained her opposition to the election of council members from geographic districts and the proposal to place a charter amendment to that effect on the May ballot

City Council Member Mike Martinez explained his support of district representation and a charter amendment

Bo McCarver and Roscoe Overton, Members of the Citizens Committee for Restructuring the Austin City Council, talked about that group's research of the issue and their recommendation of the 8-4-1 superdistrict model [see position paper, Attachment 1]. They also presented a resolution proposed by the Blackland Neighborhood Assn. and the ANC East Sector:

"The Austin Neighborhoods Council supports the restructuring of the City Council, to include at-large and district representation with the majority of the Council made up of district representatives."

So moved and seconded. Motion passed (18 in favor, 4 opposed, 14 abstained).
[Resolution A, Attachment 2]

8:20pm Better Austin Today PAC: Jeff Jack announced that the PAC's next event will be in February at Jovita's in South Austin.

8:22pm Community Committee on Neighborhoods and Schools: Kathie Tovo reported that AISD collected about 1400 responses to the recent survey. A public hearing will be scheduled in March. A subcommittee will be meeting on Tuesday (Kathie will announce on ANCtalk), and it needs to gather more ideas from the community for initiatives such as how to help schools in decline.

8:30pm Texas Neighborhoods Together: Lisa Harris and Clare reported on TNT's lobbying efforts on behalf of neighborhood issues during the 2007 legislative session, including successful support of Austin's McMansion ordinance and expansion of certain county powers to regulate land use. TNT supports the disclosure of real estate sales prices to tax appraisal districts, a perennial legislative issue. TNT is reviewing its legislative agenda for the next session. Contact Lisa and Clare if you have ideas.

8:40pm AISD Performing Arts Center: Al Weber, University Hills NA, presented the motion "I move that the Austin Neighborhoods Council support the University Hills

Neighborhood Association's initiative to keep for public use the 30+ acre tract at Loyola Lane and Ed Bluestein Blvd. that is owned by Austin ISD and that is within the University Hills/Windsor Park Neighborhood Plan and further support that this property, purchased with public bond money, be considered as the site for the Austin ISD Performing Arts Center." Seconded by Ruth Marie of Windsor Park. Motion passed (21 in favor, 1 abstained). [Resolution B, Attachment 2]

8:55pm Land Development Code Change to add GR uses to LR zoning: This will add 5000 square foot restaurants and two other general retail uses to the LR (considered local retail) zoning category. Neighborhoods should be aware that this may greatly increase the intensity of uses permitted on LR properties near them, without any zoning changes.

9:00pm Updates on Ongoing Issues, Activities & Announcements

Affordable Housing recommendations will be considered by City Council on January 31.

A motion for summary judgment in the Govalle/Johnson Terrace, OWANA, PODER lawsuit is scheduled to be heard in district court Feb. 19, at 2 pm.

Planning Commission Neighborhood Planning Committee: Planning Commissioner Sandra Kirk is heading an initiative to coordinate planning for capital improvement projects with neighborhood plans.

9:15pm Adjourn

Attachment 1.

**RESTRUCTURING AUSTIN CITY COUNCIL
Austin Neighborhoods Council, January 23, 2008**

In May 2006, the Blackland Neighborhood Association decided to explore restructuring the city council so as to improve accountability to neighborhoods and increase voter participation in elections. The executive committee of the Austin Neighborhoods Council joined the effort, and over the course of a series of monthly meetings, the informal group of interested citizens grew to include more than a dozen participants from all quadrants of Austin. The group adopted certain parameters for research and came up with some general observations to be carried forward to a larger citizens' group.

There was general agreement that Austin has outgrown the current system of electing the entire council to at-large places. Austin has grown in size and complexity to the point that no individual council member can comprehend the myriad of issues that evolve at the neighborhood and regional levels. It is also increasingly frustrating for neighborhood representatives to find a champion for their causes on the council: Which at-large member does one approach? What is the risk of offending the other six? What happens to your neighborhood if your association cannot lobby continuously at City Hall?

Why Change?

"As an indicator of civic health, voter participation rates tell us about democracy in action--the degree to which people exercise individual choices to produce community leaders and to collectively influence policies and laws."

Boston Indicators Report 2002: Civic Health, www.tbf.org

When the Blackland Neighborhood Association began to look at this issue, it was assumed that the citizens of East Austin were not participating fully in city elections. We did not realize, however, just how far our civic health had declined across the entire city until the numbers came in from the 2006 elections.

In the May 2006 election, overall turnout was only 11%; voting in individual council races was even lower, about 8%.

**8% Voter Turnout,
City Council Places 2, 5, and 6, May 13, 2006**

**40% Voter Turnout,
City Bond election, November 7, 2006**

Northeast Austin: 35%

Northwest Austin: 45%

Southwest Austin: 47%

Southeast Austin: 31%

120,000 citizens who voted in November did not vote in May

Our group of neighbors and community leaders saw this precipitous drop in civic participation as a crisis of democracy. Because turnouts in November indicate that most voters in Austin are still participating in elections on the county, state, and federal level, we believe that the crisis is confined to city government, and that **the appropriate response is to change the way we elect our representatives on the city council.**

Who Votes and Who Runs?

"Section 2 of 42 USC Section 1973 (the Voting Rights Act) prohibits the use of an electoral system including the constituting of districts that denies minority voters an equal opportunity to elect candidates of their choice."

Latino Political Action Committee v. City of Boston, 609 F. Supp. 79 (D. Mass., 1985)

Our research also revealed a stark geographic divide between east and west Austin in terms of voting in council elections. The highest voter turnout is concentrated in precincts west of Lamar. We found that voter turnout for city elections in the eastern half of Austin is about half that in the western precincts, with the result that the entire council is now elected by the same 40,000 or so voters on the west side of Austin. Voter participation in council elections is now so low in the eastern half of the city that the council's claim to represent the entire city is no longer credible, and it is clear that City Council elections are considered irrelevant in most of East Austin. The sharp reduction in voting in these precincts (which include the city's major concentrations of minority populations) confirms that **minority voters have been denied "an equal opportunity to elect candidates of their choice" in city council elections.**

11% Voter Turnout, Mayor's race, May 13, 2006

East Austin: 7.6% voter turnout, **17,510** votes (228,587 registered voters)

West Austin: 13.5% voter turnout, **36,273** votes (268,112 registered voters)

Our definition of participation in a local election is not confined to voter turnout. We know from conversations in our neighborhoods and communities that the burdens of running a citywide campaign prevent most potential candidates from considering service on the city council. We believe that a fundamental cause of low voter turnout in city elections is the lack of candidates who have connections in the low-turnout communities. Communities will not turn out to vote if they understand that **candidates of their choice can't get on the ballot.** That is what is happening in a growing segment of Austin's voting population. We have found that people who do vote in their county commissioner race in November will not vote in a city council election in May. This led us to consider the size of election districts.

How Small Is Small Enough?

"The extent to which the state or political subdivision has used unusually large election districts, majority vote requirements, anti-single shot provisions, or other voting practices or procedures that may discriminate against the minority group."

Redistricting Guideline 3, from

Latino Political Action Committee v. City of Boston, 609 F. Supp. 79 (D. Mass., 1985)

We wanted to know how small a district must be to promote voter participation and community candidates. We compared the size of the local, state, and federal districts that Austinites already vote in, and elect minority candidates from, with the city council's at-large seats.

Population of Election Districts in Austin, Texas

	Pop.	Districts	At-large	Pop/dist.
Austin ISD		7	2	92,860
State Legislature				135,000
County of Travis	812,000	4	1	203,070
City of Austin	650,000	0	7	650,000
U.S. Congress				651,619
State Senate				700,000

We also compared the size of city council districts across the country and found that Austin is probably the only city in the country that requires all council candidates to run from a district as large as a Congressional district. Population per district ranged from 10,400 in Madison, Wisconsin, with 20 single-member districts, to 951,000 in Detroit, Michigan, which selects its council from the top 9 candidates on a single ballot (an election model prohibited in Austin by state law).

Based on the existing neighborhood divisions in Austin (reflected in the 10 sectors of the Austin Neighborhoods Council), some members of our group leaned toward **10 districts of about 65,000** population, which seems to be about average for other cities with single-member districts. Based on the trustee election districts already drawn for AISD, some of us favored a hybrid model with **6 or 7 districts of about 100,000** (a little larger than the median on our list of comparable cities), with a few members elected at-large.

Comparable Cities Population Represented by Each Councilmember

City	Pop.	Districts	Pop/dist.
Madison, WI	208,000	20	10,400
Nashville, TN	570,000	35	16,285
Ann Arbor, MI	114,000	5 double	22,800
Atlanta, GA	416,000	12	34,660
Pittsburgh, PA	334,600	9	37,200
Milwaukee, WI	600,000	15	40,000
Denver, CO	555,000	11	50,450
Chicago, IL	2.896 M	50	57,900
Fort Worth, TX	535,000	9	59,440
Boston, MA	590,000	9	65,550
El Paso, TX	560,000	8	70,000
San Francisco, CA	777,000	11	70,600
Miami, FL	377,000	5	75,400
Dallas, TX	1.2 M	14	85,700
San Jose, CA	900,000	10	90,000
Memphis, TN	650,000	7 single	92,860
Memphis, TN	650,000	2 triple	325,000
San Antonio, TX	1.1 M	10	110,000
San Diego, CA	1.2 M	8	150,000
Philadelphia, PA	1.5 M	10	150,000
New York City	8 M	51	156,900
Houston, TX	1.94 M	9	215,700
Los Angeles, CA	3.7 M	15	247,000
Tucson, AZ	487,000	0	487,000
Portland, OR	530,000	0	530,000
Seattle, WA	563,000	0	563,000
Austin, TX	650,000	0	650,000

The 8-4-1 Model

Our group also considered the need for representation of overlapping communities and constituencies that cross geographic boundaries. Models of double-member districts, superdistricts, and proportional representation have proved attractive in our discussions with various community groups, because they offer an opportunity to elect representation for significant political constituencies that feel disenfranchised by winner-take-all elections.

Last month we decided to recommend a **superdistrict model**, based on the system in Memphis, with:

**8 single-member seats,
4 at-large seats**
(two members from each of two superdistricts), and
1 mayor,
for a total of 13 council members.

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 superdistricts 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 superdistrict, and the mayor.

The attached map is based on an eight-district demonstration plan drawn for the recent Charter Revision Committee by J. Gerald Hebert, Director of Litigation, Campaign Legal Center, Washington D.C., paying particular attention to neighborhood boundaries. The heavy line through the center of the city indicates one possible boundary between the two superdistricts. In this plan, residents of District 1 would vote for one person to represent their district. They would also vote in two other races to elect the two at-large representatives for Superdistrict B. Note that four of the eight districts straddle the superdistrict boundary. In those districts, the residents east of the boundary would vote for two representatives in Superdistrict B, and the residents west of the boundary would vote for two representatives in Superdistrict A. The hope is that such a plan would provide opportunities for the representative of, for instance, District 2 to work with and build alliances with the superdistrict reps from both sides of town, and vice versa.

The Charter Revision Committee considered a different superdistrict boundary, one that followed the boundaries of the single-member districts, with districts 1, 2, 3, and 4 entirely within Superdistrict B and districts 5, 6, 7, and 8 entirely within Superdistrict A.

In the course of researching the experiences of other cities, we noticed that cities that have election districts imposed upon them by a court decision tend to have a difficult time determining when and where boundaries should be redrawn. If council does put election districts on the May ballot, the charter amendment should also establish an orderly process that assures full community participation in a review of city election districts at each ten-year census.

Attachment 2.

ANC motions approved by the membership 2008 January 23:

Resolution A:

"The Austin Neighborhoods Council supports the restructuring of the City Council, to include at-large and district representation with the majority of the Council made up of district representatives."

Resolution B:

"That the Austin Neighborhoods Council support the University Hills Neighborhood Association's initiative to keep for public use the 30+ acre tract at Loyola Lane and Ed Bluestein Blvd. that is owned by Austin ISD and that is within the University Hills/Windsor Park Neighborhood Plan and further support that this property, purchased with public bond money, be considered as the site for the Austin ISD Performing Arts Center."