

## **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
<b>County of Travis</b>	<b>812,000</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>203,070</b>
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

<b>City</b>	<b>Pop.</b>	<b>Districts</b>	<b>Pop/dist.</b>
Madison, WI	208,000	20	10,400
Nashville, TN	570,000	35	16,285
<b>Ann Arbor, MI</b>	<b>114,000</b>	<b>5 double</b>	<b>22,800</b>
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
<b>Memphis, TN</b>	<b>650,000</b>	<b>7 single</b>	<b>92,860</b>
<b>Memphis, TN</b>	<b>650,000</b>	<b>2 triple</b>	<b>325,000</b>
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
<b>Austin, TX</b>	<b>650,000</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>650,000</b>

## 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:

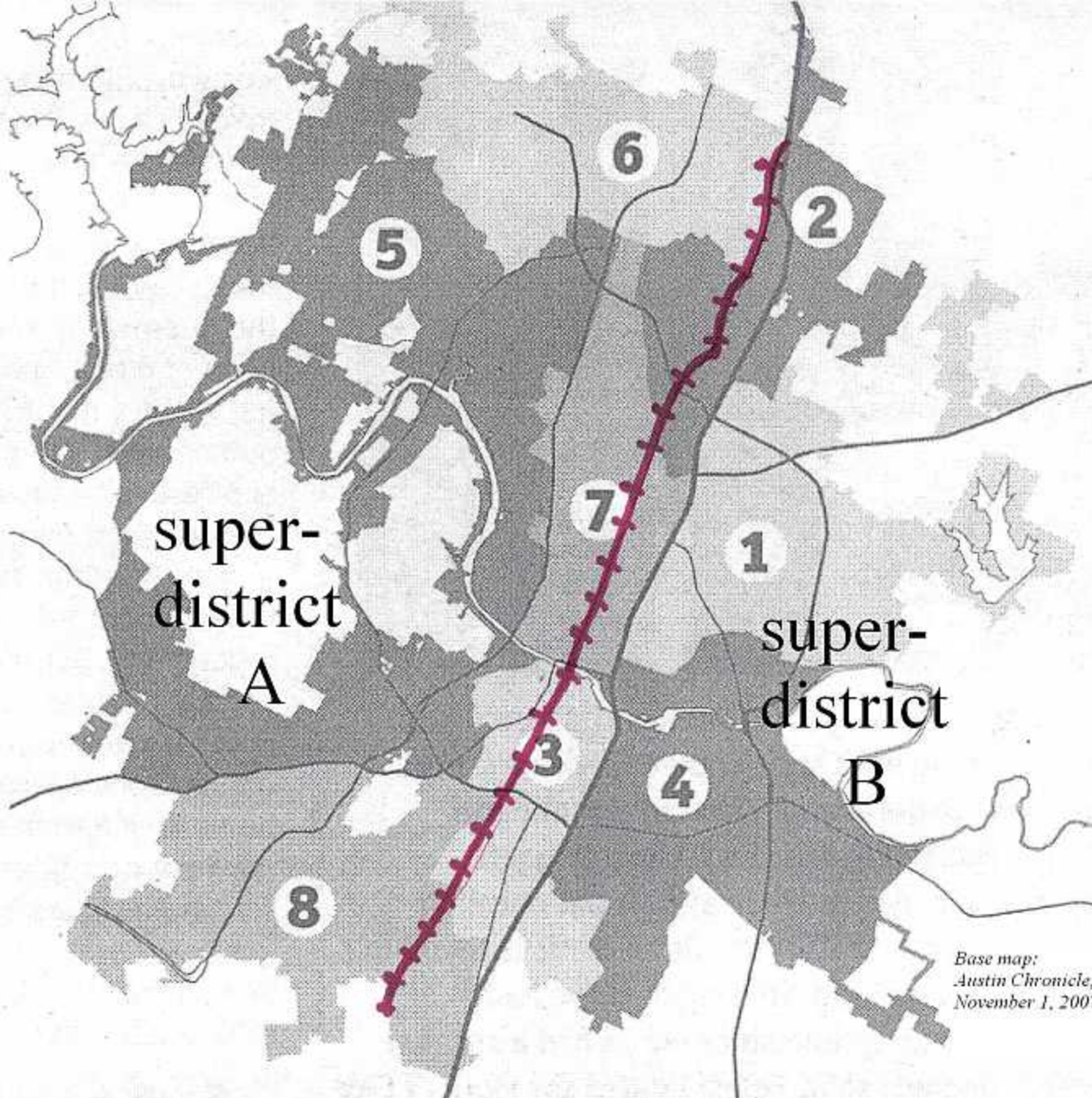
**8 single-member seats,  
4 at-large seats**  
(two members from each of two superdistricts), and  
**1 mayor,**  
**for a total of 13 council members.**

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.

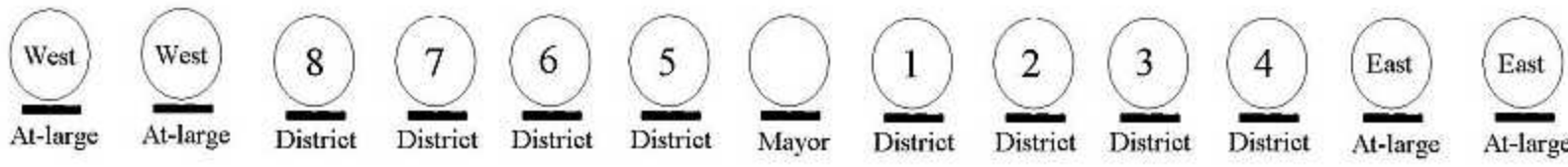
In the course of researching the experiences of other cities, we noticed that cities that have election districts imposed upon them by a court decision tend to have a difficult time determining when and where boundaries should be redrawn. If council does put election districts on the May ballot, the 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.



Base map:  
Austin Chronicle,  
November 1, 2007

8 single-member districts  
2 two-member superdistricts  
1 at-large mayor  
13 total council members

Population of districts  
(based on 650,000 pop.):  
Average 81,250  
Range 77,188 to 85,312



The 8-4-1 Superdistrict Model