

February 28, 2020

Charter Revision Commission
Subcommittee. Government Structure/
Preserving Institutional Knowledge
(Jessica Baker)

Size and Composition of City Council

Question:

Should the City of Jacksonville Charter be amended to change the size or composition of City Council?

Background

Testimony regarding the history of consolidation revealed that the number of City Council members was actually a compromise made in order to successfully advance consolidation. The compromise was political in nature because it was believed that neither set of political representatives would support eliminating their own positions through the consolidation action. Instead the compromise would see the new City of Jacksonville having 19 members (14 districts and 5 at-large) which would represent the previous City Council and County Commission members combined into one new City Council.

The subcommittee debated whether the at-large districts should be reduced or eliminated entirely, whether to create 19 council districts by eliminating the at-large districts, or amend the charter to give clear responsibility in policy making to the at-large members.

Rational For At-Large Districts

At-large seats provide citizens with multiple representatives. Every citizen is represented by 6 members – their district council person and the 5 at-large members.¹ This gives citizens many avenues to engage with their elected officials.² At-large seats provide an opportunity for more minority representation on the city council.³ At-large council members are a counterbalance to the district council members because they are able to view the needs of the city as a whole.⁴ Lastly, since at-large members do not have attend to the day-to-day problems of a particular district, at-large council members theoretically have the time and freedom to tackle “big picture” policy items.⁵

¹ 02/21/20 Handout by Jeff Clements, pg. 1.

² Ibid.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid.

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Rational Against At-Large Districts

The citizens of Jacksonville would better served if all council members represented district, thereby reducing the population per district from about 67,000 to 50,000.⁶ Considerable more effort is required to win an election to an at-large seat than is required to run a district-level campaign.⁷ The at-large members do not vote substantially differently from the district members on the vast majority of issues on which votes are taken, so do not seem to provide a noticeably different perspective.⁸

Conclusion

The Subcommittee concluded that the benefits for keeping at-large districts outweighed the rationales against at-large districts. Additionally, the subcommittee determined that it was best left to the individual council member to decide what policy issues to address and to not provide a clear responsibility to the at-large council members.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ 02/21/20 Handout by Jeff Clements, pg. 2.

⁸ Ibid.