

**OFFICE OF THE CITY COUNCIL**

**RESEARCH DIVISION**

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**RULES COMMITTEE REDISTRICTING PUBLIC HEARING**

**Meeting Minutes**

 **February 10, 2022**

**6:00 p.m.**

**First Coast High School Auditorium**

**In attendance:** City Council Members Brenda Priestly Jackson (Chair), Randy DeFoor, Aaron Bowman, LeAnna Cumber, Rory Diamond (arr. 6:07)

**Also:** Council Member Sam Newby; School Board Members Daryl Willie, Kelly Coker and Cindy Pearson; Paige Johnston – Office of General Counsel; Bill Killingsworth – Planning and Development Department; Jeff Clements, Amber Lehman, Richard Distel - Council Research Division; Kim Taylor – Council Auditor’s Office; Yvonne Mitchell and Rhonda Hall Patrick - Administrative Services Division; Eric Grantham – Information Support Services

**Meeting Convened**: 6:02 p.m.

Chairwoman Brenda Priestly Jackson convened the meeting and the attendees introduced themselves for the record. The Chair read a statement regarding the School Board’s prohibition against the distribution of political advertisements and campaign materials on school property.

Legal Framework of Redistricting

Paige Johnston of the Office of General Counsel gave an overview of the requirements for redistricting under federal, state and local law based on the data produced by the latest U.S. Decennial Census. She explained the “one person one vote” standard under the 14th Amendment (Equal Protection clause) to the U.S. Constitution and the fact that the population of the districts should not exceed a 10% deviation between the most and least populated districts to meet court scrutiny for equal protection. The City Charter requires compactness and contiguity in addition to the overarching “one person one vote” standard. Courts have ruled in various cases that natural boundaries should be respected and communities of interest should be appropriately represented. She explained “gerrymandering” as a term meaning the process of deliberately manipulating districts so that a racial or political group’s interests are either enhanced or diminished. She explained that race cannot be the predominant reason for crafting a district, but the courts have declined to rule on the permissibility of using political partisanship as the predominant basis. The U.S. Voting Rights Act provides that the ability of racial minorities to elect a candidate of their choice is a factor that should be considered in making redistricting decisions so as not to dilute that group’s ability.

Ms. Johnston explained “packing” and “cracking” as tactics used to dilute the voting power of a specific group or interest. “Packing” consists of concentrating a large percentage of a particular group or interest into a small number of districts, giving them a high likelihood of electing candidates of their choice in those districts, but not in any others where they have little to no representation. “Cracking” consists of spreading persons of a particular group or interest widely among many districts so that they have little to no influence in any of them.

Ms. Johnston described the process from the work of the Special Committee through the hand-off of the plan to the City Council and the Rules Committee’s conduct of the mandated public hearings on the proposal. The Ordinance Code requires 3 public hearings be held around the city; the Rules Committee is holding 4 hearings. The final redistricting plan will approved by City Council at one of its meetings between March 8 and April 12, the final date by which the plan can be adopted per the City Charter.

School Board Perspective on Redistricting

School Board Chair Daryl Willie thanked the Council for bringing the public hearings to public schools where he believes important civic dialogue should take place as an example to students of the importance of civic engagement. He was pleased that the School Board members were invited to participate from the very beginning of the redistricting process to provide school-related perspectives, although not as voting members. Their input on the impact of the proposals on school zones and feeder patterns was welcomed. He recognized Mr. Justin Fluent, the principal of First Coast High School, and thanked him for his and his staff’s cooperation in conducting the hearing.

Development of the Redistricting Proposal

Bill Killingsworth, Director of the Planning and Development Department, said that, in addition to the standard legal requirements, the Special Committee on Redistricting gave his department 3 basic instructions at the start of the process: 1) minimize river crossings to the extent practicable; 2) minimize changes to existing district boundaries; and 3) keep incumbent council members who are eligible for re-election in their current districts. The department looked at crafting a plan with no river crossings, but the population disparity on either side of the river (significantly higher population on the south/east side than on the north/west) made that impractical. An option was explored that put District 2 completely south of the river rather than crossing the river as it does now, but that disrupted the rest of the districts substantially and so was abandoned. District 13 had to grow to get its population up to within the maximum deviation range. District 11 has grown substantially over the last 10 years and needed to shed over 20,000 people to get close to the target population of 71,000, while Districts 7 and 8 had to gain population to get them to within the maximum 10% deviation. Mr. Killingsworth described the adjustments made to the various districts and answered questions posed by speakers at the previous public hearing about the rationale for those changes.

Chairwoman Priestly Jackson said the last Rules Committee redistricting public hearing will be next Thursday at William Raines High School and she hopes that all questions posed by the public through this evening’s meeting will be answered at that time.

Public Comment

Janie Jones expressed concern about the change in District 2 assigning Yellow Bluff Landing to District 7, which she sees as an example of packing of Black population into District 7 unnecessarily and splitting the neighborhood off from the adjacent more similar neighborhoods in the Yellow Bluff corridor. Keeping that neighborhood in District 2 represents a unified community of interest.

Mike Ludwick said he supports the Northside Coalition in calling for scrapping the proposed maps and starting over with an independent consultant to draw the maps. The current proposal allowed council members to pick their voters rather than allowing voters to choose the elected officials.

Daniel Henry said the Florida House and Senate at least did functional analyses of their proposed districts to determine what percentage of what kind of voters was needed to elect candidates of their choice. If the state can do it, the City should be able to do it as well before adopting the new districts.

Rosemary McCoy, a member of the ACLU, Northside Coalition, NAACP, and Harriet Tubman Freedom Fighters, said those groups sent a detailed report to the City Council members earlier today which they commissioned from a University of Texas professor of government analyzing the racial voting patterns of 14 elections in Jacksonville. The results indicated that Jacksonville has very polarized voting and therefore needs to take steps to ensure that the proposed districts comply with Section 2 of the federal Voting Rights Act. She urged the Council to redraw the districts to ensure fairness.

Eric Parker said the residents of the Northside have more in common with their neighbors to the east and west than they do with the residents of the portion of District 2 lying south of the St. Johns River. He believes District 2 should connect to the Pecan Park and Oceanway areas instead of crossing the river to the south.

Lanelle Phillmon, President of the League of Women Voters of Jacksonville, expressed concern about the lack of citizen access to the redistricting process. Special Committee on Redistricting Meetings were held during the work day when citizens could not attend, modern technology was not used to solicit public input, and there was no consideration of starting from scratch when developing districts that might have produced better results. Jacksonville is still dealing with the same problems it was facing 60 years ago. Citizens don’t realize their votes are being diluted by the way districts are currently drawn.

Alexander Watkins said Districts 7, 8, 9 and 10 represent packing of Black voters into those districts which limits their overall electoral impact citywide. The community has not been involved in redistricting and more transparency is needed. He would like to see an ad hoc committee established to speak for the community and increase civic engagement in the process.

Sharmin Smith, a Jacksonville Beach resident, said Jacksonville is full of progressive people who want to see gerrymandered districts thrown out and replaced with truly representative districts within the federal guidelines. The community doesn’t understand what it would take to get rid of gerrymandering. Incumbents naturally want to protect their seats but that’s not in the best interest of the community.

Ms. Priestly Jackson said she participates in a staff debriefing every Monday after these hearings to discuss the points and question raised. She will have a presentation at the next meeting on the history of how the current districts came to be. All questions raised at the public hearings are being compiled and sent to all City Council members for them to contemplate. She thanked the School Board and school staff for being gracious hosts for this event.

The next public hearing is next Thursday, February 17th, from 6:00 to 7:30 p.m. at William Raines High School.

**Meeting adjourned:** 6:48 p.m.

Minutes: Jeff Clements, Council Research Division

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