

**OFFICE OF THE CITY COUNCIL**

**RESEARCH DIVISION**

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**RULES COMMITTEE REDISTRICTING PUBLIC HEARING**

**Meeting Minutes**

 **February 17, 2022**

**6:00 p.m.**

**William Raines High School Auditorium**

**In attendance:** City Council Members Brenda Priestly Jackson (Chair), Randy DeFoor, Aaron Bowman, Rory Diamond, Randy White, LeAnna Cumber (arr. 6:38)

**Also:** Council President Sam Newby; School Board Members Daryl Willie and Kelly Coker; Paige Johnston – Office of General Counsel; Bill Killingsworth – Planning and Development Department; Jeff Clements, Amber Lehman, Richard Distel, Colleen Hampsey - Council Research Division; Kim Taylor – Council Auditor’s Office; Yvonne Mitchell - Administrative Services Division; Steve Cassada – Information Support Services

**Meeting Convened**: 6:01 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. Federal level requirements include the 14th Amendment to the U.S. Constitution’s “Equal Protection” clause requiring relatively equal population among districts to meet the “one person, one vote” standard. The courts have ruled that a maximum deviation of 10% from the largest to the smallest district population is permissible. Either total population or voting age population can be used as the basis; the City has traditionally used total population. Race may not be the primary reason for drawing district boundaries. The City Charter and Ordinance Code require compact and contiguous districts. The Special Committee on Redistricting directed the Planning Department to consider communities of interest in drawing boundaries in order to represent those interests, and also to consider natural boundaries (water bodies, major roads, etc.). The committee also directed the department to start work from the existing district boundaries to continue representing current communities of interest.

Ms. Johnston explained the concept of gerrymandering, which is the process of drawing district maps to advantage or disadvantage one group or another. The courts have not ruled that political party considerations are not permissible in redistricting. A state constitutional amendment several years age relating to the creation of fair districts applies to state representational districts, not to cities and counties. She explained the concepts of “packing” and “cracking” with regard to minority representation. “Packing” consists of concentrating a group of citizens with common interests into a small number of districts where they have considerable voting power, but little to none elsewhere. “Cracking” is the opposite tactic – dispersing citizens with common interests among many districts so that they do not constitute a majority able to elect candidates of their choice in any district. The 1965 Voting Rights Act prohibits use of these methods to deliberately dilute a group’s voting power.

Ms. Johnston said the Rules Committee is taking public comment but not answering questions at the public hearings. The committee members and staff are taking notes of all issues raised and that will inform their debate in committee meetings in the coming weeks. If a “substantial” change is made in the maps, another public hearing must be held. The committee will start deliberating at the March 1 meeting, and City Council must approve a final plan by April 12th.

School Board Perspective on Redistricting

School Board Chair Daryl Willie thanked the City 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. Vincent Hall, the principal of Raines 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 4 basic instructions at the start of the process: 1) use total population rather than voting age population, as is traditional; 2) minimize river crossings to the extent practicable; 3) minimize changes to existing district boundaries; and 4) keep incumbent council members who are eligible for re-election in their current districts. The only place where that last directive made a difference was the At-Large 3 residence area where candidates running in the special election for the currently vacant seat lived on opposite ends of the residence area. 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. There is too little population north/west of the river to make 7 full districts possible while staying within the 10% deviation from the larger population districts south/east. 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 in favor of keeping the districts nearly the same as possible. 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 District 8 had to gain population to get to within the maximum 10% deviation. Mr. Killingsworth described the adjustments made to the various districts to keep them in balance and continue representing traditional interests.

Public Comment

Rodney Hurst Sr. said at the time of consolidation, after a city annexation campaign had failed, there was a commitment to creating single member districts to replace the previous at-large system so that the minority community would be properly represented. That was a consideration to the Black community in deciding to vote for consolidation and that commitment to minority access districts should be maintained.

Anthony Brown presented a list of demands from the Moncrief, Durkeeville and New Town communities to equitably support their neighborhoods and fulfill the promises of consolidation – infrastructure improvements (sidewalks, drainage, street lights, beautification), enforcement of the Neighborhood Bill of Rights, development of a community hub “one stop shop” for improvements and a safe zone for children. He referenced a Students to Troops program for predominantly minority high schools. The area needs more small business initiatives and more grocery options in the food desert.

Carnell Oliver said he doesn’t like the status quo and thinks there has been no progress since the last redistricting. There are institutions in the city that could have drawn better districts. The state fair districts constitutional amendment doesn’t apply to local governments but he’s going to try to get the state to mandate that. We don’t need the 4 packed minority districts any more. The current council members are providing poor representation to the Black community.

Jessica Ransome of the Democratic Women’s Information Network said they are concerned about the process to date. 20% of residents who spoke at previous meetings suggested map changes, while the remainder talked about the lack of citizen input from the beginning of the process; “packing” in Districts 7, 8, 9 and 10 to protect incumbents while diluting voting power elsewhere; using a different definition of race than the US Census to disadvantage Blacks; and not using a functional analysis to determine political partisanship effects from the new districts. The current maps don’t represent the people but rather protect incumbents of both parties.

Joy Burgess said she has been at all of the public hearings and believes that a redistricting executive summary should be created to explain the process and the end result to the citizens. The City should create and fund an ad hoc task force to opine on the redistricting process and promote better citizen participation. The maps should be redrawn considering the results of a functional analysis and using voting age population and should “unpack” Districts 7, 8, 9 and 10. Split neighborhoods should be addressed. The City needs to explore creating an independent citizen commission to do redistricting in 2031.

Alejandra Granado of the NAACP Legal Defense Fund said the Voting Rights Act requires analysis of the districts for potential “packing” and its effect on minority voting rights. The proposed map doesn’t ensure equal opportunity to elect candidates of choice for minorities. Communities of color are already under-represented and that needs to be rectified. The committee needs to listen to the voice of the citizens and take the spirit of the Equal Protection Clause and the Voting Rights Act into account to ensure that the diversity of interests in Jacksonville are fairly represented.

Therese Gamble advocated for using voting age population rather than total population for redistricting because the Black community lost so much population during the COVID pandemic. The 2020 Census didn’t count everyone, especially the minority community. It’s time to quit “packing” districts and quit using historical practices that perpetuate disparity.

Prez McLain spoke against redlining practices causing too many abandoned properties. Those houses need to be sold and renovated for reuse. Too much housing is out of the financial reach of average citizens. The city needs an ordinance to mandate that houses are used and can’t sit abandoned.

Alexander Watkins said racial “packing” is evident in Districts 7, 8, 9 and 10. That wasn’t the intent, but that is the result that needs to be addressed. The boundaries should be redrawn to unpack that population using voting age population and a functional analysis. Communities are made by people and they will be changed by people. Listen to the desires of the constituents who elected you.

Daniel Henry said he has been to all of the public hearings with the same questions and re-emphasized that he has not heard anything about whether a functional analysis was done on the proposed districts that would tell how much population of what type is needed to elect candidates of choice for minorities. Please directly address the public’s questions when making final decisions on the maps.

Patrice Montague thanked the committee for coming to the community and said that the ultimate goal should be fairness for future generations.

Eric Parker said it appears that no changes will be made to the districts despite there being “packing”, gerrymandering and incumbent protection. There is no difference between the two political parties and that’s why there is no change. Politicians are expert at exploiting divisions to keep the citizens subjugated. More government is never the solution.

Tyra Smude said she used an online app to look at the districts in detail and is appalled by School Board District 6. She has tried to make suggestions to the committee but never heard anything back from the council members. Who sets the standards for what is compact? Why was there no historical presentation about why the districts are the way they are as promised at the last meeting? The process has been inefficient and doesn’t represent citizen interests.

Velma Rounsville recommended that an independent redistricting commission be appointed for the next process in 2031, which should be planned for now. That would give citizens a better feeling of inclusion in the process.

Leola Williams said the whole process has done a disservice to the citizens and needs to be improved. The public doesn’t get enough information early enough in the process to be able to participate. Incumbency seems to take priority over the needs of the citizens.

Jennifer Cowart said the city is missing its chance to do something transformative by analyzing for “packing” and “cracking” but instead has decided to protect incumbents and the status quo. Very little information has been made easily available to the public. An independent redistricting committee would be a great improvement over the current process.

Sam Coodley said it is unfair for citizens to be kept from participating in the public hearing because of an arbitrary decision by the Chair to move up the card speaker card submission deadline. Voters are being disadvantaged by the closure of early voting sites in minority areas. A UNF poll released today says a large percentage of voters do not trust the redistricting process. Over half of minority voters are “packed” into the 4 minority districts and that doesn’t promote public trust in the electoral system.

Ben Frazier said its time for forward thinking and making changes, which requires facing reality squarely. Power concedes nothing without a demand, and the community is demanding that the gerrymandered plan being presented today be scrapped and replaced because of the overt “packing”. The minority community has little power citywide because it is confined to a small area. Incumbency protection is wrong. He wants an independent consultant hired to draw a plan that meets constitutional muster. The people should pick the politicians, not the other way around. A new approach is needed.

Chairwoman Priestly Jackson said that the Rules Committee has held 4 hearings over 4 weeks rather than 4 in one week as was done 10 years ago to better facilitate public input. She will now draft a memo summarizing all of the public’s input at the public hearings and send it to the full Rules Committee explaining the process for proposing amendments to the plan as presented. The Rules Committee will start consideration of the plan at its March 1st meeting and there is another public input opportunity at the City Council meeting on March 8th. The Rules Committee public hearings have been debriefed by the Rules Chair and staff every Monday morning and all comments and concerns raised will be documented and presented to the Council. The process needs to be completed by April 12 pursuant to the City Charter and Ordinance Code.

**Meeting adjourned:** 7:19 p.m.

Minutes: Jeff Clements, Council Research Division

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Posted 2.18.22 5:30 p.m.