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RESEARCH DIVISION**

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SPECIAL COMMITTEE ON REDISTRICTING

Meeting minutes

**October 20, 2022
11:00 a.m.**

Location: City Council Chamber

In attendance: Council Members Terrance Freeman (Chair), Aaron Bowman, Rory Diamond, Nick Howland, Sam Newby, Ju’Coby Pittman, Randy White

Also: Council Members Reggie Gaffney, Matt Carlucci, Ron Salem, Michael Boylan; Mary Margaret Giannini, Helen Roberson, Paige Johnston – Office of General Counsel; Merriane Lahmeur, Sharonda Davis - Legislative Services Division; Jeff Clements – Council Research Division; Steve Cassada – Public Information Division; Kim Taylor – Council Auditor’s Office; Bill Killingsworth – Planning and Development Department

Meeting Convened: 11:03 a.m.

President Freeman convened the meeting and the attendees introduced themselves for the record. Mr. Freeman described the committee charge and committed to developing a new redistricting plan by November 3rd for consideration by the City Council on November 4th. He said that openness and transparency in the process are paramount. There will be an email box for public input, and public comment will be accepted at every meeting. On November 3rd there will be a “map chat” event at City Hall for public review and discussion of the proposed redistricting plan.

Mary Margaret Giannini of the Office of General Counsel described the federal court order mandating the creation of new districts and the role that race may play in that process. The OGC has obtained an outside demographics expert in redistricting and voting rights (Douglas Johnson, President of National Demographics Corporation in Glendale, California) who has worked with many states, municipalities, school boards, and other districting entities. He will help the Planning and Development Department develop map proposals and will be in Jacksonville for future meetings to answer questions from the special committee. Ms. Giannini said that legal considerations for the special committee include: 1) complying with the requirements of the City Charter and Ordinance Code, and state and federal law

regarding nearly equal population, contiguous and compact districts, and adequately representing the varied interests of the community. The redistricting process may not simply start from the 2011 districts.

On October 25th placeholder legislation to adopt a new redistricting plan will be introduced into the City Council so that it can be properly passed by the court's November 8th deadline. It won't contain any maps but will be the vehicle to get the legislative process started, with a specific map being added later in the process. Public comment on redistricting will be allowed at all meetings. The special committee will then meet on November 1, 2 and 3. Draft maps will be submitted by staff at the November 1st meeting for committee consideration on the 2nd and 3rd and a recommendation to full Council for action at a special council meeting on November 4th. The public comment email box is available at 2022redistricting@coj.net. Those emails will be compiled by Office of General Counsel staff and provided to the subcommittee and the full City Council for their information before voting. The full council will receive and vote on the subcommittee report on November 4th at a Special Council meeting and the General Counsel's office will transmit the resulting adopted plan to the federal court by the November 8th deadline.

Council Member Bowman asked about how the creation of new districts and the City's appeal of the federal court ruling interact. Ms. Giannini said the appeals process, which is being handled for the City by outside legal counsel, will very likely extend beyond the November 8th deadline so the Council needs to comply with the judge's order by creating new districts. A request to stay the judge's order has been filed with the federal district court and, if not granted, would be appealed to the 11th Circuit Court. Mr. Bowman said that the multiple moving pieces could be very problematic if the stay request and a subsequent appeal are not settled by December when the Supervisor of Elections has to start preparing for the spring elections coming up in March and May, 2023.

Council Member Diamond asked Ms. Giannini to confirm his brief summary of the current state of affairs. Currently only one map exists, the one passed by Council in the spring, which has been ruled unconstitutional by a federal district court judge who ordered the City Council to craft and submit a new redistricting plan. A stay of that order has been requested by the City and if that stay is granted then it's possible the Council could use the existing map for the 2023 elections. If Council wins its appeal of the judge's initial ruling that the plan is unconstitutional, then a full-blown trial over the plan's constitutionality could occur. The City and the plaintiffs who filed suit against the plan could agree to a new map and ask the court to approve it. The Council could approve a new map and ask the federal judge to approve its constitutionality. Any map that is approved will very likely look different from what we have now. Ms. Giannini agreed with that summation of the various possibilities for how the proceedings could play out.

Council Member White asked if the expert consultant would be getting his information to craft a new plan from the Planning and Development Department. Ms. Giannini said he would, along with voter registration and election information from the Supervisor of Elections.

Council Member Gaffney asked if the consultant would be meeting individually with council members to talk to them about their districts. Ms. Giannini said Mr. Johnson will be in Jacksonville beginning October 31st and the Council President will decide what interaction between the consultant and individual council members is appropriate. Mr. Gaffney said that council members can provide valuable background information and context on the districts.

Council Member Pittman asked for information on Mr. Johnson's qualifications and previous experience with redistricting plans and court challenges, including the results of the legal proceedings in which he has been involved. Ms. Giannini said she will provide the committee members with his background information.

Council Member Salem asked about the placeholder legislation to be introduced next week and whether it will need to be acted on as an emergency. Paige Johnston of the Office of General Counsel said the ordinance will contain boilerplate adoption language, to be amended later. It will be introduced on October 25th, advertised for a public hearing at the November 4th special council meeting, and will be acted on as a one-cycle emergency. The public may address the redistricting effort during the Public Comment period at the October 25th meeting on which the bill will be introduced.

Council Member Boylan asked about impact on School Board districts and the School Board's role in crafting any new districts. Ms. Giannini deferred to Council President Freeman as to how they may have input. Mr. Freeman said he's been in contact with the School Board in an advisory capacity to let them know what's happening with regard to the court order. School Board members are welcome to attend the special committee meetings and have input into the process.

Council Member Carlucci said he doesn't support appealing the federal court ruling. There are 9 safely partisan districts now and 5 competitive districts. He understands the complexity of the redistricting process having once chaired the Redistricting Committee in a previous term and believes that the current districts were drawn for partisan purposes. He hopes that future districts will be drawn on a more competitive basis to better reflect the full diversity of the community. He recommends more compactness, better reflection of diverse communities, and less partisanship. The community is trending in that direction and the district-making process should follow the community's example.

Council Member Bowman said the redistricting maps belong to the City Council and not the attorneys, so who council members talk to during the process is up to the Council President, not the attorneys. Ms. Giannini said that she her earlier comment was not meant to imply that council members could not talk to the consultant.

Council Member Diamond said the Council is bound to follow the law and produce new districts in a very short time frame and he is very confident that a good map will be created and presented to the court in a timely manner.

President Freeman reiterated that the public will have multiple opportunities to comment and provide input to the deliberations either in person or via email throughout the process.

Public Comment

Carnell Oliver said the City Council doesn't control the process because the seats belong to the public. The public should be in charge. Council members shouldn't be trying to manipulate and control the system for partisan purposes.

Mike Ludwick of the Northside Coalition said the most important tool in democracy is the citizens' right to vote which gives them the power to choose their representatives and make government work for them. Please listen to the voice of the people and stop trying to control the system.

Mr. Freeman thanked the members of the special committee for being willing to take on this challenge. He noted that the Council currently has a record 7 Black members and has elected Black presidents in back-to-back terms.

Meeting adjourned: 11:49 a.m.

Minutes: Jeff Clements, Research Division
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