

Minneapolis Charter Commission Community Meeting Minutes

Tuesday, May 25, 2010 - 6:30 p.m.

North Regional Library
1315 Lowry Avenue North
Minneapolis, Minnesota

Commissioners Present: Bernstein (Chair), Connell, Ferrara, Lazarus, Rubenstein, Stade, Schwarzkopf

Chair Bernstein called the meeting to order at 6:35 p.m. He explained that the purpose of the community meeting was to accept public comment on proposed amendments to the Minneapolis City Charter relating to the redistricting process, as follows:

- a) Defining a “minor” party member of the Redistricting Commission; and
- b) The process to be followed should the Redistricting Commission fail to adopt a plan within the prescribed time.

Bernstein added that the Charter Commission was also willing receive comments on anything related to redistricting.

James Everett, 1320 Oliver Avenue North, was present with questions regarding the redistricting process. He asked that the pros and cons of the proposed amendment be explained.

Bernstein explained that a Charter Commission Redistricting Task Force had been formed several months ago. Two of the proposals that came out of the Task Force meetings were: (1) To allow for a minor party that has an officer elected in the city of Minneapolis to the City Council, Board of Estimate and Taxation, Park Board, or School Board to be considered a major party for the purposes of redistricting and allow that party representation on the Redistricting Commission. (2) Currently, if the members of the Redistricting Commission fail to adopt a plan, a plan would be drawn at random by the City Clerk’s Office. The proposal would change that to have the Charter Commission adopt a plan in that event.

Gary Schiff, 9th Ward City Council Member, was present and thanked the Charter Commission for holding community meetings and listening to ideas from the public. He distributed a letter signed by ten Minneapolis City Council members which stated that they believed that while the proposals being discussed would make slight improvements to the redistricting process, they did not address some of the fundamental flaws in the current process. They agreed with the Minnesota Chapters of the League of Women Voters and Common Cause that the process could be made both less political and less partisan. They respectfully requested that the Charter Commission more carefully consider placing a Charter amendment on the ballot this fall that would give the Charter Commission the responsibility for redistricting. The Charter Commission is the most appropriate entity to lead redistricting for several reasons — the members are appointed through an apolitical process; it is a standing body with a long-term view whose members have the benefit of a deep and full understanding of Minneapolis; and it is not beholden to any one entity within or

outside of the city of Minneapolis. While they understood that not all Charter Commissioners may want this responsibility, it should be noted that the Charter Commission would have the support of the Minneapolis Elections Department and that the detailed work of the redistricting process may be delegated to a subcommittee and professional staff requiring the entire Charter Commission to approve only a final map. They believed the best way to give Minneapolis residents confidence that the redistricting process is fair, apolitical, democratic, and equitable for all is for the Charter Commission to take responsibility for it. They asked that the Charter Commission give this alternative careful study and debate in order to consider a Charter amendment to that effect to be voted on by Minneapolis residents in the 2010 general election.

Lazarus inquired why the amendment couldn't take place with a 13-0 vote of the City Council rather than as a ballot question.

Council Member Schiff stated that the City Council would like the Charter Commission to explore the proposed amendment and that it be considered by the public, too. It was his belief that any changes to the redistricting process should be passed by a Charter amendment approved by the voters of the city of Minneapolis.

Al Flowers, 4110 3rd Avenue South, was present and stated that he would like more information. As an African American, he was very concerned about the redistricting process, especially since there had been a lawsuit ten years ago as a result of the redistricting process at that time. The issue should have a bigger audience. Since the Redistricting Commission is appointed, will there be minority input and representation in the process and will it be done fairly for the African American community?

Bernstein noted that while the Charter Commission is somewhat geographically diverse, it is not racially diverse.

Connell stated that at the same time, the Charter Commission is not closed, either. Any resident of the city is free to apply for appointment to the Charter Commission.

Rubenstein added some background information regarding the Redistricting Task Force. The people who proposed the Charter amendments were volunteers who were already members of the Charter Commission and volunteered because they were interested in redistricting. One of the first things they did was look at the court case from ten years ago to define the issues and concerns about how the community was represented in the redistricting process, whether it was fair, and how to make the process more open. The proposed amendments are a very small part of what had been discussed but were necessary as initial changes in the Charter before redistricting begins. The big concerns were to make sure that the community felt it had a voice in the process which might mean opening the Redistricting Commission to more people and not just political appointments. One proposal that is not included with the proposed amendments because it is not part of the Charter, is to hold a series of well-publicized public meetings in the fall long before the Redistricting Commission is established. When the Task Force looked at the Charter, they found it was not necessary to change a lot regarding redistricting, but to change the process and make the process more open. Holding a series of public meetings in the fall will allow people to talk about what they think should go into the redistricting process.

Mr. Flowers noted that since the Redistricting Task Force was a subcommittee of the members of the Charter Commission, it had no minority representation. It is important that there is minority representation whether it is the Minneapolis NAACP, the Urban League, or community members. He was glad the Charter Commission was gathering the public's input early so the public could be aware that they should apply to get some type of representation in the redistricting process. During the last redistricting process, the Northside, particularly the fifth ward, lost a portion of downtown which was turned over to the seventh ward. He hoped that in the next redistricting process, the ball park area would be moved back into the Northside so that revenue could go back to the Northside where it originally was. Another ten years of the same thing could be detrimental to the community if the most fair and objective process is not followed.

Mr. Everett stated that one issue was that there is still a digital divide in getting the word out to the community to apply for appointment to the Commission and even to notice the community meetings. He inquired if there would be any attempt to right some of the wrongs that were done during the last redistricting process when the redistricting was done around certain people's homes and some property became more valuable, or to line up with the most votes.

Bernstein clarified that the role of the Charter Commission was simply to appoint certain members of the Redistricting Commission. As it is currently set up, the Charter Commission has nothing to do with redistricting once the members are appointed. Council Member Schiff's proposal would change that if the Charter Commission also sat as the Redistricting Commission.

Mr. Everett inquired as to the reason three Council Members did not support the proposal to have the Charter Commission also sit as the Redistricting Commission.

Council Member Schiff stated that while he didn't want to speak on behalf of other Council Members, he thought that Council Member Lilligren, Ward 6, wanted something to come from the grassroots and didn't want to be seen as a Council Member authoring a Charter amendment. Council Member Colvin Roy, Ward 12, was not pro or con but was just not ready to sign on to the letter. Council Member Diane Hofstede, Ward 3, felt the current process worked and didn't think it needed to be changed.

Lazarus noted that the Charter Commission dealt with the very long and complex Minneapolis City Charter. Appointing members to the Redistricting Commission is one tiny part of their job. Taking on more responsibility, as suggested by Council Member Schiff, had not yet been discussed among the Charter Commissioners.

Kenya McKnight, Fifth Ward Resident, P.O. Box 11162, was present and stated that she had just been informed of the meeting 45 minutes earlier and was not very informed about the content of the meeting. She inquired how Charter Commissioners were appointed.

Bernstein explained that the 15 members of the Charter Commission are appointed by the Chief Judge of Hennepin County. Minneapolis residents can apply through the City's open appointments process or directly to Judge Swenson when there are vacancies.

Connell explained how to locate the Charter Commission website and information on appointments to boards and commissions. Many neighborhood organizations also publicize openings on city boards and commissions.

Ms. McKnight stated that holding community meetings was a great idea, but non-traditional ways of engaging communities were also needed so that everyone could become more informed about the process. There are a lot of people concerned about redistricting, but they don't know how to get involved. The last redistricting process disenfranchised her community economically. The new growth in the North Loop happened from her community being divided. When the lines were re-drawn in the last redistricting process, the North Loop area was removed from the 5th Ward. Money was not put into the North Loop area until the lines were re-drawn. Federal dollars were awarded for housing development in the North Loop. While she was not 100% sure of everything that went into the process, plans were made for development in that area, but her community was not aware of the plans and were not involved. If any community engagement took place, it was minimal because there would have been some resistance from the community. At this point she was not placing blame, but it was important to consider what happened in the past and work to make sure the process is more open and there is more community involvement in the future. When changes are considered to the redistricting process, other possible political implications on communities should be considered such as strengthening the economic base of the community. Her community lost assets during the last redistricting and the housing market has gone down. The asset base of the community has to be built up and people need to be provided with real opportunities.

Mr. Flowers inquired if under Council Member Schiff's proposal to have the Charter Commission sit as the Redistricting Commission and appoint additional members, how would the Charter Commission ensure it selected additional members from the demographic where there is a high percentage of minorities and how could the community help the Charter Commission appoint good candidates to the Redistricting Commission?

Bernstein stated that the proposal from Council Member Schiff had just been received and the Charter Commission had not yet had a chance to discuss it.

Ferrara stated that he had served on the Redistricting Commission ten years ago and under the current redistricting process, people who are active in their political party can ask to be appointed to the Redistricting Commission. It is the most direct way that citizens can be involved in redistricting. That's how he got involved ten years ago. He would be happy to meet with people after the meeting to help them become more involved in redistricting.

Mike Dean, Executive Director, Common Cause Minnesota, 2323 Franklin Avenue East, was present and stated that when he testified before the Charter Commission at their last meeting, he highlighted three areas for redistricting reform: (1) The make-up of the Redistricting Commission; (2) Improving the process; and (3) Making it more transparent. Tonight he wanted to focus mainly on the make-up of the Redistricting Commission. The previous speakers highlighted two key issues: (1) There is frustration in the community about the current redistricting process. The people felt the process was not fair last time and that it did not represent the larger community. (2) The proposal brought forward by Council Member Schiff that the Charter Commission sit as the Redistricting Commission is a clear message from the Council that the current set of proposals before the Charter Commission does not go far enough specifically due to the issue of political party

representation. Common Cause and the League of Women Voters has highlighted that the current process is too dominated by political parties and thus is not representative of the larger city of Minneapolis. They had recommended that the make-up of the Redistricting Commission be less than half from the political parties, that there be an odd number of appointees, and that potentially the same judge that appoints Charter Commissioners should appoint members of the Redistricting Commission. The proposal from the Council Members is a step in the right direction, but is not the end-all solution. It raises two potential issues for the Charter Commission: (1) The Charter Commissioners did not sign up for this and it requires a lot of work. He was not sure if members of the Charter Commission were prepared to dedicate the necessary amount of time. There may be a hybrid of the proposal that could be considered such as having the Redistricting Commission composed of perhaps half of the membership of the Charter Commission and the other half being appointed by the Charter Commission through an application process that is not dependent upon political parties putting names forward, but appointing individuals at large that fit certain criteria such as diversity and geographic balance within the community. There are other models that exist in other municipalities and also at the state level. For example, the state of California uses more exclusionary factors such as a Redistricting Commission member cannot be a spouse of a current elected official. (2) Regarding the diversity of the Redistricting Commission, he was concerned about the current make-up of the Charter Commission and its lack of diversity. The theme from speakers tonight is to get the larger community involved in the process, especially in light of what happened in previous cycles.

Stade suggested Mr. Dean prepare an amendment that reflects those ideas and present it to the Charter Commission at their June 2 meeting.

Mr. Flowers agreed and suggested that minority members or a member of the NAACP be included in the membership of the Redistricting Commission.

Mr. Everett inquired if the Redistricting Commission was given a budget.

Ferrara stated that during the last process, there was a budget, a staff member, and resources dedicated to the Redistricting Commission. He had placed a request to the City Elections Office and the City Attorney's Office to develop a plan and budget for the 2012 redistricting process based on the last budget.

There being no one else present wishing to comment, the meeting was adjourned at 7:35 p.m.

Peggy Menshek
Council Committee Coordinator