

Galveston voting district changes being considered

By JOHN WAYNE FERGUSON | Posted: Thursday, May 7, 2015 12:15 am

This article has been corrected

GALVESTON — The city could be on its way to choosing a new way to elect its officials — and is looking to an old idea for inspiration.

On Monday, a committee assembled by the city council to review the charter recommended a referendum proposition about whether to reduce the number of council districts from six to four, and to create two at-large council positions, which, like the mayor, would be chosen through an island-wide vote.

The city currently has six council districts. Only the mayor is elected at-large.

The recommendation is expected to be passed on to the city council later this year, following the committee's review of the entire charter, said committee Chairman Fred Raschke.

The idea of reducing the number of council districts has been proposed, and approved by voters before.

In 1998, the change to a four-district makeup was approved by voters during a charter election. According to published reports from the time, 4,290 voters supported the change, 3,001 were against it.

The same election ordered the city to draw new district boundaries from “north to south.”

Previous opposition

At the time, the proposal was supported as a way to bring more “citywide representation.” However, minority groups opposed the moves, saying the proposals would effectively reduce minority representation on the city council.

Before the city could implement its new districts, however, the city had to receive permission from the U.S. Department of Justice. At the time, the justice department, was required by the Voting Rights Act to approve redistricting proposals in certain areas of the country.

The justice department objected to Galveston's plan.

Under the plan, the four new districts did not include a single district where blacks or Hispanics made up a majority of the district's population, the department said in a letter outlining its objections.

“Given the existence of racially polarized voting in municipal elections, we concluded that these features of the proposed electoral system would limit the ability of minority voters to elect their candidates of choice to the city council,” the justice department wrote.

The city has unsuccessfully appealed the justice department’s objections twice.

Supreme Court changes

A U.S. Supreme Court decision in 2013 that essentially eliminated federal approval of voting law changes gave the city another shot at reducing districts.

The decision allowed states to move forward with some rules — such as requirements for voter identification. It also appears to allow Galveston to move forward with another vote.

If voters passed the reorganization again, the city would seemingly be free to change its districts.

While they voted to recommend the change in districts, the charter commission did not make a recommendation on how the districts would be drawn.

Charter committee member Steve Greenberg said that part of the issue would best be left up to the city council to consider — if it accepts the recommendations.

“I think when you draw up the districts, you carve up the same minority population,” Greenberg said. “Whatever they’re doing to accomplish that now can be with four districts as well as six districts.”

There is currently only one council district that has a minority-majority populations. District 1, which covers an area of the island mostly north of Broadway and east of 25th Street.

Two other districts, District 2 and District 4, have significant minority populations, but one group does not make up the majority of either districts’ residents.

In a memo sent to council members in July 2013, the Galveston City Attorney’s Office wrote a change to a four district system would mean “the current African-American and Hispanic districts would have smaller percentages of minority in the respective districts.”

Deadlines, decisions loom

There is the possibility the recommendation does not reach the council this year.

Raschke said the committee would not submit its final recommendations until the group goes through the entire charter. Through three meetings, the committee has managed to review three of the 14 charter sections. In order to place an item on November’s general election ballot, the city council would need to approve a ballot by August.

The committee also intends to rank their recommendations to council in order of importance, Raschke said, and the recommendation for redrawn voting districts could fall below issues related to changes related to financial rules and other topics.

“It won’t be official until we get all of the way through the whole thing,” Raschke said.

An earlier version of this article misspelled planning committee chairman Fred Raschke's last name.