

OUR VIEW

4-2-1 proposal deserves a fair hearing

The idea of changing the arrangement of Galveston's City Council deserves a frank public debate and islanders shouldn't allow early opposition from voting and minority rights groups to stall the process short of that.

Galveston is now divided into six single-member council districts from which each of the six council members is elected, while the mayor is elected at large. The city's charter review committee recently took an initial vote to recommend including on referendum ballots a change from that 6-1 arrangement to one under which four council members would be elected from four single-member districts, while two council members and the mayor would be elected at large. It remains to be seen whether the committee will forward the 4-2-1 plan to the council among its final recommendations.

The committee's initial vote drew opposition from local chapters of both LULAC and the NAACP, which argued such a change would undermine minority voting power and lead to a less democratic system in Galveston.

Advocacy groups tend to see nefarious intent anytime anybody proposes tinkering with single-member voting districts and there's plenty in the history of redistricting to justify that tendency. The groups play watchdog roles in our political process and the best watchdogs bark

sooner rather than later.

At same time, however, well-meaning groups ought to be willing to hear a reasonable pitch from well-meaning people about maybe doing things better for everybody.

Everybody who cares about getting anything done in Galveston should set aside for just a minute the notion that anything but single-member districts would, by definition, cut minority voting off at the knees and consider the plan on its merits, of which there are several.

For one thing, a majority of Galveston voters has twice approved the 4-2-1 system. It's part of the city charter and would be the law except the U.S. Justice Department refused to grant it pre-clearance. A 2013 U.S. Supreme Court decision removed the Justice Department's authority to preview redistricting proposals, which allowed the possibility of actually adopting what the charter demands.

Among the best things about the 4-2-1 plan is that it would allow each voter a say in four of six council races — mayor, two at-large seats and one district seat — rather than in two. That means every voter would have a shot at electing a council majority.

That's not a reduction in the power of the ballot box, it's a great increase, applying to all voters, minority or not.

The plan might also blunt the growing districtification

in Galveston that too often has the six council members running off in six directions, rather than pulling in one.

Nurturing the power of voting districts is only one of the flaws in a single-member arrangement gerrymandered by race or ethnicity.

Such districting also assumes that:

- Electing a person of your own race is the best way to ensure effective representation. We all know that's not true.

- Qualified minority candidates live only in minority districts. Not true.

- Qualified minority candidates can't win at-large races or in districts not gerrymandered by race. Not true, as Galveston history shows, and also condescending to both candidates and voters.

- Minority voting districts don't guarantee minority representation. The largest minority bloc in Galveston is Hispanics, which account for about 29 percent of the population, yet there's no Hispanic representation on the council. That's because Galveston's lone minority district, District 1, was drawn to elect an African-American council member.

We argue it's an open question whether a 4-2-1 system would undermine minority voting opportunity and democracy in Galveston or enhance both. At very least, the plan has enough potential merit to warrant a good debate.

• Michael A. Smith

Seeing clearly in the dark

With sunlight pouring down through the seasonal forest of Central Park, a woman walks in complete darkness.

Sitting on a park bench I first notice an older woman dressed in a gray T-shirt and white pants, moving through a nearby crosswalk. A young man, his hand gently touching the back of the woman's arm, accompanies her. Yellow cabs, buses, and others wait, I notice, with an unusual patience for New York City.

Leonard Woolsey



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Then see the white cane. The young man, making sure she gains her footing on the opposite sidewalk, turns and races back across the street. Taking a pair of white work gloves from his back pocket, he disappears into a nearby apartment building.

I've sat on this bench before — a time when venerable leaves still hid from the harshness of the New York winters. Today, in early summer, I am seeing a different Central Park — one where the color green rules the day.

Tap, tap, tap. I watch as the woman makes her way toward the park entrance.

Tap, tap, tap. The cane, sketching a repeating pattern before her, is beautifully rote yet highly telegraphic. Her footsteps across the cobblestones, I notice, are both bold yet careful. I admire her confidence. Pausing, I wonder what park she sees through her fingertips.

Tap, tap, tap. Sitting on the bench, my mind is swimming in the simple visual differences a few months on the calendar can make. The noise of my vision, is drowning out any subtleties I might otherwise experience. I realize the woman and I see two different worlds.

Tap, tap, tap. While I might see the world around me in optical generalizations — a large tree hanging over a path, a fountain spraying water toward the sky, or a statue overlooking an nearby entrance — I realize the woman with the white cane sees a world of much deeper in both subtitles and details. She knows a Central Park I am simply unable to imagine. All along her walk are — at least to me — hidden markers of familiarity allowing her to 'see' where she is along her daily walk.

Tap, tap, tap. I see the tip of her cane pausing, searching, and finding a particular spot where the cobblestone and asphalt road meet. She steps up. We both see this same patch of ground — only she sees it more. She knows the height of the curb, where it leads, and how the surface feels beneath her footing, all details completely lost on me.

Tap, tap, tap. Turning, the woman enters a park bustling with people, bikes, and dogs, a visual postcard so to say. I realize I now see Central Park in a brand new way — one I see only because of a woman without vision.

In life, the tiniest details are almost always there for us to see and appreciate. But sometimes, as it happened to me, it takes someone who sees the world through a different set of eyes to remind us to of what we are missing.

Making mistakes is just part of living

“Hey Paw Paw, why does it seem so hard to make the right choice and so easy to make the wrong choice?”

As my mind began to absorb the question, I thought where in the world did that come from?

As feelings of failure filled my mind, panic began to set in. Fearful that I would look like an inept blockhead — in front of this fine young man — my mind searched for a way out. When in a bind I do what I always do, I plead “O Lord, I need help with this one.”

Crossing the room not far from Grayson, my “guardian angel” must have tapped me on the shoulder because I did not see the round squeaky toy and small chair that lay in my path. As a loud squeal hit my

Guest column



Grayson Martin and George “Paw Paw” Grace live in Santa Fe. They

write from a traditional (sometimes hilarious) point of view.

ears and a small chair did battle with my legs, I did what any self respecting “Paw Paw” would do — I hit the floor.

With cat like reflexes and howling laughter — never one to pass up a good wrestling match — Grayson pounced on his wounded prey. I thanked God for this painful reprieve because I knew this question would not go away, it would come back in some form. Between honker honks and twisting of ears, I gathered my thoughts. As the

battle raged, I began to believe, maybe, I could make a respectful stab at this vexing question.

After all, my audience was just one curious 9 year old.

After using the age old headlock and nose bend, I received an “I give” from Grayson.

As we had a drink and discussed the pros and cons of various wrestling moves, Grayson said “Paw Paw, my tests last week in school made me think, why does there seem to be so many more wrong answers than right answers?”

“Well Grayson, as I live my life I have come to believe that the reason we are here is simply to live, learn and improve and to do this we must make choices and our choices both good and bad must come together to form our river of life.”

“Paw Paw, do you

mean we have to make mistakes?”

“No, we do not seek to make mistakes, we seek to make the right choice, but we will make mistakes and we should use them to learn and try not to make the same mistake time and again.”

“That sounds hard Paw Paw.”

“It can be hard and painful, but that is why I believe and have faith. The very fact that we can learn, improve and attain proves to me that there is a higher place where our creator resides and he is there to help. Remember, always keep your motives as pure as you can and you will always be blessed.”

“Ok, Paw Paw I will try. Hey Paw Paw, You know one day I am going to win the wrestling match.”

“I know Grayson, I look forward to it.”

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