

Proposed council districts draw protest

By JOHN WAYNE FERGUSON | Posted: Monday, June 15, 2015 12:15 am

GALVESTON - A proposal from a city committee that could lead to a long-talked about change to Galveston is drawing public criticism from civil rights groups — before the City Council is even confirmed to be officially considering it.

On Thursday, leaders from the Galveston chapter of the NAACP and LULAC, the League of United Latin American Citizens, appeared in front of council to speak out against a proposal that would change the way council districts are elected.

The proposal would ask voters if the city should switch from a system where council members are elected from six districts to a system that features four districts and two at-large positions.

The leaders of the civil rights groups say the change is not necessary in Galveston.

“Since the early 1990s, single-member council districts have always provided Galveston healthy racial, ethnic, gender and geographic representation on city council,” said Mary Patrick, president of the Galveston chapter of the NAACP. “We want the six to continue because we feel that’s important to Galveston.”

In May, the Galveston Charter Review Committee voted to preliminarily recommend that the City Council consider putting the redistricting question on the November ballot. The recommendation was not final and has not officially been forwarded to the council for its approval.

But in interviews, leaders from the civil rights groups say the fear is that the recommendations will be passed on to voters at some point.

Civil rights activists interviewed Friday would not say if they thought such a proposal would be approved by voters, but did say that they believed it was their job to educate the public on the consequences of such a vote in the coming months.

“I can never predict outcomes of elections,” said Joe Compian, chairman of LULAC’s civil rights committee. “I think our role is to educate the public as to why we have single-member districts and why they remain important for our community.

“A change from a single-member district to a 4-2-1 is a retreat from what we consider representative democracy,” Compian said.

The issue of minority representation on Council, and how it can be ensured, has long been at issue in Galveston.

The city adopted a six-district system in 1993 as part of a settlement in a vote-dilution lawsuit. Before that, all of the council members were elected at-large.

In a charter election in 1998, the voters approved a change to a 4-2-1 system. However, the U.S. Justice Department — which had authority under the Voting Rights Act to review redistricting proposals in certain areas of the country — intervened before the change could be implemented because none of the four new districts were minority-majority.

A 2013 Supreme Court decision removed the Justice Department's authority to review redistricting proposals, opening the door for Galveston to potentially try again.

The civil rights leaders speaking out on the plan said they were unclear on the city's motivations for even wanting to broach the redistricting question.

"It's a system that works," Compian said. "It works because it is the best connection that we have a locally elected representative."

Proponents of the four-district system have said the change would result in more council members who consider issues from a citywide perspective.

Civil rights groups are skeptical, however, and fear that the change would once again dilute the city's voting districts to the disadvantage of minority candidates.

Historically, the City Council has been dominated by white leaders.

Only one council district is a majority-minority district.

District 1 geographically covers the area north of Broadway and west of 25th Street, though much of its population is actually in more densely populated areas located south of Broadway. The district is represented by Tarris Woods, the only minority member on Council.

Woods' immediate predecessor in the position, Cornelia Harris-Banks, also was the only minority member of the Council during her term.

According to the 2010 census, Galveston's population is 46 percent white, 28 percent Hispanic and 20 percent black.

In its preliminary recommendation, the charter review committee did not include a recommendation on how the council should draw district lines.

In the 1998 plan approved by voters, district lines would have been drawn north to south, with no regards to demographics.

The charter review committee meets again on Tuesday.

For the charter changes to appear on November's ballot, the City Council would have to approve ballot

language by August.