

An All At-Large System is Bad for Asheville
Council Member Vijay Kapoor

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At last night's City Council meeting, we approved beginning the Charter amendment process to reinstate a City Council primary in March (which I supported) and to go back to the all at-large voting system (which I opposed). Council will hold a public hearing on these two Charter changes at our September 24th meeting and will need another meeting to vote on them for the changes to become effective (no date yet set for that meeting, but will likely occur in late October).

I remain committed to my proposal of keeping the five districts, but adding two additional at-large members for a total of nine members. Below are the comments I made at the Council meeting:

Since getting on Council, I've spent more time researching Council districts than any other issue and, based on that analysis, I publicly changed my position to oppose an all at-large system. Hearing the concerns that both sides had, I proposed a compromise mixed district/at-large system that would keep the five districts drawn and add two additional at-large members for a total of nine members. My compromise would have allowed every resident to be able to vote for a majority of Council members. Regardless of the vote tonight, I will continue to push for that system.

The question that we as a City and we as a Council ought to be asking ourselves is "What system is best for the average Asheville resident?" Not, "What system sends a message to the General Assembly?" Not, "What system will most likely elect someone who I support?" Not, "What system benefits the most well-organized and politically-connected groups?" The question for us should be, "What is best for the average Asheville resident?"

Here are four reasons for why I think that my proposal, and not an all at-large system, is best for the average Asheville resident:

1. First, a system with some districts ensures that every resident, every neighborhood, and every part of the City will have a Council member who is directly accountable to them. You know who specifically to call when you have an issue. With the current at-large system, the average person is at the mercy of whoever up here decides to respond to their constituent request and, if we're being honest with ourselves, there are certain Council members who do a much better job than others in responding. When you have districts, there's nowhere for us to hide.
2. Second, a system with some districts will better represent the needs of the average resident to City Hall. In her seminal book The Death and Life of Great American Cities, Jane Jacobs wrote, "The chief function of a successful district is to mediate between the indispensable, but inherently politically powerless, street neighborhoods, and the inherently powerful city as a whole. Among those responsible for cities, at the top, there is much ignorance... Districts have to help bring the resources of a city down to where they are needed by street neighborhoods, and they have to help translate the experiences of real life, in street neighborhoods, into policies and purposes of their city as a whole." I think that the current at-large system is a contributing reason for why many of our underserved neighborhoods are in the condition that they're in today. They never had a

specific person advocating for what they needed and if we go back to the all at-large system, they will miss out on that chance again.

3. Third, the mixed district/at-large system that I'm proposing all but eliminates the concern that parts of the City will be pitted against each other. Under my proposal, there will be four members including the Mayor who will be elected at-large and every Asheville voter will be able to elect a majority of Council. As result, the Council as a whole will not favor or disfavor any particular area of the City.
4. Fourth, my proposal is an Asheville, not a Raleigh solution. I understand the desire to tell the General Assembly to stay out of our business. It's a point of pride. I get it. That was part of the reason that I voted against the original referendum. But what I'm proposing here isn't Raleigh's solution, it's ours should we have the courage to enact it. I've had many people say to me that they're not necessarily opposed to districts, but that they resented that Raleigh imposed them. I think that if we put my proposal on a referendum, a mixed district/at-large system, it would pass.

During this debate, I challenge those who support the decision to go back to the all at-large system to directly answer the question of why they believe an all at-large system is best for the average Asheville resident.

I encourage the media, when covering this story, rather than to focus on the sideshow fight with Raleigh, to ask, "What system is best for the average Asheville resident?"

If an all at-large system is so good, why does every other large city in North Carolina other than Wilmington have some form of district representation?

If an all at-large system is the best system for minority communities, why did the NAACP Legal Defense Fund write: "Fewer and fewer districts still practice at-large voting. That is because courts and decision-makers long have recognized that discriminatory methods of election, **like at-large voting**, enhance the discrimination that communities of color experience because of socioeconomic and other disparities in life opportunities between Black and white communities."

Even with the huge disparities that we see in this city between white and black residents and white and black communities – all of which occurred under an all at-large system – some believe that a system with districts passed unanimously by the State Senate is racist. Really? Given where we are today under an all at-large system, how could it possibly get worse?

Council has the authority to act. Let's have a real and open debate on the substance and be guided by the question, "What system is best for the average Asheville resident?"