

**Does City Council by
Districts Equal
Accountability?
The People Will Decide**



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In December 2008, after a motion to put a charter revision on the ballot was defeated 4-3, I urged the Detroit City Council to put the voters' interests before their own and let the people decide. Last week City Council finally put the people first and approved a resolution placing a proposal for the revision of the 1997 Detroit City Charter on the May 5, 2009 ballot. The resolution was passed with a 6-2 vote.

I applaud the six members who affirmed the voters' right to decide on a governance structure that's best for the citizens. Based on their vote against the resolution, it seems Council President Monica Conyers and Martha Reeves would rather substitute their own judgment for that of the

voters. One has to wonder if their continued opposition is driven by their own need for self preservation.

After all, if the voters have an opportunity for charter revisions they may require a City Council that is more accountable to the people. Many believe districts will create more accountability on City Council. Instead of opposing charter amendments, those opposed to districts should make their case against the issue and let voters make an informed decision. There are legitimate concerns on both sides of the argument.

Will City Council by districts create more accountability? Districts would certainly make it easier to get people with fresh, new ideas in office, but I'm not sure it would create the change and accountability people are seeking.

Under the current charter the City Council functions and powers include: investigative powers; control of property; the passage of ordinances and resolutions; the approval of contracts; and the amendment and final approval of the budget.

City departments, which are responsible for providing city services, are only accountable to the Mayor. The city charter

specifically prohibits the legislative body from giving orders to any department or department employee. This fact was vividly demonstrated when Ella Bully Cummings, former Police Chief, refused to appear before City Council—even after she was subpoenaed.

Therefore, simply changing the at-large seats to district seats will not create more accountability. The Council cannot be accountable for city services when they have absolutely no control. Under the current charter this would only give the Mayor more power because council members would have to compete for resources in their districts. It enables a Mayor with political prowess to barter district services for council votes. It increases the probability of corruption.

Some argue that the Mayor's office, the executive branch, must be allowed to execute policy and administrate city departments as he or she sees fit. Giving City Council any additional authority would only serve as an obstacle to services. However, in order for City Council to have any impact on city services they must be given some control and input on departments.

One solution would be to create a structure similar to

Washington, D.C. The District of Columbia City Council has a combination of at-large and district seats. Much like the United States Congress, the executive branch controls the daily operations of departments, but City Council confirms all department heads and has department oversight through their committee structure.

This structure would give our City Council members the opportunity for some input at the beginning of the process, without allowing them to become involved in the daily operations of city departments. Department oversight should be an ongoing process in our current committee structure, which reviews contracts. There is also an opportunity for oversight through the budget review process.

The fact is whether City Council is at-large, by district or a combination of both—whether they have no authority or complete authority over city departments—we will not have an effective government unless we elect competent people who can get results.

Therefore, if Detroiters truly want a change in city government we have to change the way we vote. We must do our homework and elect

people based on their ability, not their name recognition. We have to stop looking at the package and pay more attention to the product.

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