

TO: Multnomah County Charter Commission  
RE: Multi-member districts

May 12, 2022

Members of the Commission,

I have been following the *Portland* Charter Commission's work very carefully for the last few months, and I see that your commission and the subcommittee are considering some of the same concepts. As your subcommittees begin to report out recommendations based on their research and deliberation, I feel compelled to write to you, as I've written to the Portland Commission, about the lessons learned in Baltimore about multi-member districts. Baltimore's experience is crystal clear: **multi-member districts were a direct cause of dysfunction and citizen frustration, and the single-member districts that Baltimore implemented in a citizen initiative are a dramatic improvement.**

1. Single-member districts offer clean, direct, understandable lines of accountability.

Single-member districts have a distinct advantage over multi-member districts when it comes to access, accountability, efficiency, responsiveness, clarity of function, and representation. This is fundamentally because of the simplicity of the relationship between the voter and their representative: there is one person who is responsible for the interests, and accountable to constituents, of one district. A councilperson cannot hide from their direct responsibilities of representation and constituent service. The smaller the district (the more the council members), the more power accrues to individual voters and neighborhoods. A citizen can easily identify, communicate with and rely on "my councilperson."

2. Baltimore's switch to single-member districts resulted in a younger, more diverse, more active, and more representative council.

In Baltimore, prior to 2003, Baltimore had six three-member districts. But the three members usually ran as a slate, voted similarly, and if they weren't long-time incumbents, they were hand-selected for their slate by the long-time incumbents. The three members either kept a unified front or passed the buck between each other when it came to accountability, legislation, and constituent service. After a charter reform citizen initiative in 2003, Baltimore implemented 14 single-member districts and the situation improved remarkably. Individual council members became much more accountable overnight. Longtime incumbents, who no longer could hide from accountability, retired or were defeated at the polls. The Council got younger, more diverse, more active, more independent, more creative, and more productive legislatively. Oversight of the Mayor and city programs became more aggressive because individual legislators needed to answer to constituents directly.

3. More proof? Portland's failed City Council is essentially one multi-member district.

Many of the failures of Baltimore's multi-member districts are evident in Portland. The current Portland City Council can be understood as one singular worst-case multi-member district. With all councilmembers purporting to represent all citizens, the accountability to individual citizens is as dilute as it gets. Neighborhood-level influence is practically impossible.

4. The demonstrable downsides of multi-member districts far outweigh any theoretical upsides of a proportional representation system.

I understand that there are strong local proponents of proportional representation schemes, and although I'm agnostic on the proportionality concept, and the ranked-choice voting to facilitate it, I'm extremely skeptical that it can work in the County without a politically impossible increase in the number of councilmembers.

The main reason a proportional representation theory would be proposed is so that underrepresented portions of the electorate will be able to elect a councilperson to a multi-member district without requiring an impossible geographic gerrymander. But to be truly effective, this will require either districts that are too few and too large, or it will require a three- or four-fold increase in the number of council members. An electorate that's otherwise ready for reform may be easily turned off if it's told that it can't guarantee sufficient district representation, or it needs to elect (and pay for) way more councilmembers for it to work as advertised.

Proportional representation simply means that the complicated gerrymandering of districts to achieve an outcome is replaced by the even more complicated gerrymandering of election rules to achieve an outcome. But the outcomes are not guaranteed, and in fact, there is strong potential that some outcomes may be just the opposite of those desired. For one thing, proportional representation in a multi member district means, by design, that while it's theoretically possible that more citizens MAY be represented by their first choice, EVERY citizen will be represented by someone who is NOT their first choice.

While I understand the non-partisan nature of the Commission's work, it's important to understand the potential for partisan outcomes. For example, one of the largest "underrepresented" but well-organized segments of the county electorate would be minority party voters. In a complicated proportional representation system that rewards game theory over traditional majorities, partisan campaign apparatus is likely to be a big winner.

**In summary**, as your subcommittees narrow in on their research and recommendations, I cannot emphasize enough that **for good government, single-member districts are far more preferable than multi-member districts.** At the very least, Multnomah County should wait until Portland decides whether to implement their multi-member district scheme. And if they do, Multnomah County should wait to see what happens.

Thank you for this opportunity to provide comment,

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