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Craig Tounget and Members
Independent Citizens Redistricting Commission

September 7, 2013

RE: Thoughts on 10-1 Redistricting and North Austin

Dear Sirs,

I am the founder and former president of the Walnut Crossing Neighborhood Association (WXNA) and a resident of that North Austin burg in precinct 263. I have recently begun following the work of the Redistricting Commission and have a number of comments and observations that will perhaps be of value.

I appreciate that this commission is a volunteer effort and applaud all the members for their service. It is my intention that the following points be taken as constructive.

1. Communication to the general public about the process is at this point quite poor. A visit to the official website shows only a list of meetings, a list of commissioners, and very rudimentary data. The link marked "The Process" only reveals information about the process of selecting the commission, not any information on how the commission will conduct its work, what the steps are, what the timeline is. For example, there is no real statement of purpose and mission, or even the vaguest criteria for what would constitute successful districts, or how citizen input will be weighed versus organizations, etc. Nor any mention of how citizens or organizations should organize or present ideas to the commission. I attended a recent outreach meeting and realized that some of this is discussed in these public forums, but the overwhelming majority of Austinites will never attend those, particularly if the website does not make it in any way clear how they can participate at all. The primary outreach and information tool the commission has is its website, and it should be of paramount importance that it be comprehensive and updated. You can see from some of the confusion and ire of some of the participants at the outreach meetings how confused even active members of the community are.
2. Related to the above is the arbitrary nature of various maps *already* in circulation and included in the minutes and agendas of the early meetings of the commission. It seems that maps are being "considered" and modified and sent around before there is any consensus on what the criteria for the maps should be. If such criteria already exists, then it is not readily visible on the main website. At the public meeting I

attended there was a handout with the basic Charter criteria, which should be on the website page, along with other criteria that was bandied about at the public forum. I have already been lobbied by groups to support this or that version of a map for our area, and am at a loss as to how maps even exist so early in the process. The AGR maps, for example, are everywhere, seeming to be the de facto starting point for most of the discussions. This to me seems both premature and misguided until some principals are in place as to what the maps are meant to achieve. The AGR maps have a clear political agenda and bias which should NOT be taken as the will of a majority of Austinites, or we would have no need for your commission. It also creates the impression that a small band of insiders has already made the major decisions. This may not be remotely true, but the commission needs to be out there in making clear that “proposed maps” are just individuals and groups shooting their mouths off and are *not* proposed by you, the official commission. The various proposed maps should be available to look at on the website so that the general public can see what is officially being presented to the commission, rather than being bombarded with propaganda from various groups as our source of information.

3. What *should* the districts achieve?

There are some groups that take as a guiding tenant that the *primary* goal of districts is to insure X number of minority opportunity districts. But this approach to me seems arbitrary and denies the reality that people have more in common due to socio-economic class and geography than race. Moreover, this approach would institutionalize from the outset weirdly gerrymandered districts created not because of common needs but only to obtain some racial demographic. It is also not the primary reason that most people voted for the charter amendment. If creating majority minority districts is *in fact* a goal, then it should be made explicit in the principals and goals and be supported by some rationale that outweighs other criteria. This should not be a hidden, “handshake” goal of the commission, because it will clearly create otherwise illogical boundaries. And if this is a goal, how high on the list of priorities is it? Does it outweigh all else, and if not then what is more important? While it is true that the law outlaws “diluting” minority votes, it does NOT mandate creating illogical gerrymandered districts solely for the purpose of creating special racial districts. It is also true that an ideal city would not even *have* racially segregated neighborhoods, so if we move towards that eventuality, the notion of maintaining the majority-minority districts will become ever more difficult, every more gerrymandered, making racial integration counterproductive to maintaining these opportunity districts. What exactly does the law require, for those of us who are not civil rights advocates or lawyers? That needs to be explained on the website, so it is not defined by the advocacy groups.

It is my opinion that Austin has a number of major and minor “hubs” of development, culture, shopping, (or the lack thereof), and that populations circling these hubs have a lot of common interests relating to these hubs, whether or not they belong to the primary racial demographic. Working outward from these hubs, and factoring in economics would be a good way to start, rather than starting with racial demographics.

4. What is the role of the major transportation corridors in creating districts? Some of the default assumptions are that district boundaries are somewhat synonymous with highways. Perhaps in some cases this is true, but it is a suspect assumption that may again cement in place some unnecessary divisions. In some cases, it may be beneficial that two council members share representation over a major artery, because that means when there is agreement, there are two votes to move it forward, but it also denies the fact that centers of interest for communities often cross these boundaries, and that residents living close to the arteries on either side may have more in common than residents living further away.
5. The subject of the transportation corridor is of significance to my far North Austin area around Mopac and the Burnet/Gateway development area. There are working class neighborhoods on both sides of Mopac that have major interests in common. The folks within a mile or so west of Mopac between 183 and Parmer have far more in common with the population east of Mopac than with the newer and often more affluent developments to the northeast around Anderson Mill and the 620. For example, connectivity across Mopac is an important issue that affects mostly those of us near the corridor, but not so much for folks living around the 620. The sole elementary school in the area is Summit on the west side of Mopac, and it serves kids down as far as Braker and Burnet on the east side of Mopac. Mopac is *definitely* a barrier in our community, but it is one we want and need to surmount, not entrench. For better or worse, the east side of Mopac is where a good deal of commercial development will occur that will directly impact our neighborhoods, and it would be unfortunate if that commercial corridor was lumped together with the same district that extends to I-35. Attached is a very rudimentary map of what I would consider the *North Mopac District*. It is not likely large enough, population-wise, at this point, but it could be enlarged to the east as far as Lamar, or a ways to the south as far as Anderson Lane and maintain the basic makeup of the district.
6. I would highly recommend that the commission develop an online tool for regular residents not affiliated with a special interest group to create their own district, based on what they see as their major concerns and interests. Such a tool would locate the person's address on an interactive map and they would have the task, using voting precincts, to fill in an area of 80,000 residents around them that they felt was geographically and culturally unified or rational. Basically, clicking on a precinct would add it to your district, but it would have to be contiguous, and it could not exceed 80,000 persons without simultaneously deleting a precinct. It would be a very basic game-like interface that could easily be developed with help from UT or the local programming community. This tool could then form the basis of some data from average citizens which could be averaged out to form a composite. Absent some sort of online tool of this sort, it is only people with access to arcane population data, specialized mapping software, and enormous amounts of time on their hands that are able to generate maps for consideration. This in itself introduces an obvious bias in what is being considered. Personally, I would limit the ability of people to draw only their own district in this data gathering exercise, with which they would have the greatest knowledge and stake.

Thank you for your time and consideration and for volunteering to help move Austin forward. I look forward to the commission's results and to being an active part of making it happen.

Sincerely,

Javier Bonafont

PROPOSED NORTH MOPAC DISTRICT

A community of interest centered around Summit Elementary, Balcones District Park, Milwood Library and The Domain/Burnett Development Area.

