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Dear Commissioners:

You are individuals who are smart and conscientious and who care about your task. Any resident of Austin who has seen your progress and how you work together would be grateful.

The citywide districting plan that emerged on Saturday is a great first effort. It has some legal problems, but my understanding from the meeting was that the plan was intended as a first effort to be modified as appropriate in response to public testimony and the advice of your legal counsel. I am sure that you will make adjustments as needed in response to those concerns.

A few comments:

1. Public testimony and input remains a critical component of what you are doing. If politicians were drawing the districts, the testimony at public hearings would largely be ignored. An objective of the independent commission was to make the public testimony meaningful. You are meeting this objective. The commission's approach of proceeding by neighborhoods and communities of interest as defined by public testimony is excellent.
2. There was considerable misinformation on Saturday about the county election precincts and the manner in which the city annexes territory. Please just bear in mind that the manner of drawing precincts is significantly regulated by state law. The precincts are **not** based on population. Their size is based on the number of registered voters and on other requirements such as that no precinct may cross a congressional, state representative, state senate, etc. district line. The result is sometimes strange in appearance (e.g. small precincts consisting of only one census block). For example, a precinct may have thousands of persons, but only a few registered voters (e.g. around UT). The county voter registrar of Travis County does a very competent and professional job. Do not believe for a moment that it is drawing precincts willy-nilly without careful attention to state law, the number of registered voters in each precinct, and the availability of a polling place within the precinct.
3. There was also some misinformation Saturday on census blocks. A census block can contain as few as 0 persons, especially when it has been drawn in the past to connect parts of a jurisdiction along a roadway (e.g. for annexations to a city). Census blocks can also contain thousands of persons. I am sure that you realize the most common cause of this apparent anomaly – high rise apartments, student housing, county jails, etc. Understandably, the census bureau does not attempt to divide the residents in such housing by whether they live on the first or ninth floor.

4. Section 2 of the Voting Rights Act applies to your actions. It has been interpreted in hundreds of cases. The application and interpretation is complex. Your legal counsel is positioned to provide you with the correct analysis.
5. I believe you will find that the proper acronym for "Spanish Surname Registered Voters" is "SSRV," not "SSVR."

Good luck.

Steve Bickerstaff