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at Central Texas
Democratic Forum

Austin Ain't Broke – Stop Tryin' to Fix it!

— About Council Districts

By Bob Binder, Former Councilmember

512-474-1515 – bobbinder@sbcglobal.net – 406 Sterzing St., 2nd Floor, Austin 78704

September 10, 2012 to Central Texas Democrats

- The City of Austin simply ain't broke – but some keep trying to fix it. This will be the 7th time since 1973 – that's about once every 5 ½ to 6 years – they just keep coming around. It's time to tell them to STOP!
- Austin should not be divided by race or geography. Period. We're a community, we should not divide ourselves up into groups by race or geography. We're Austin.
- First and foremost, why on earth does anyone want to give up their right to elect and access to 7 councilmembers out of 7 (7 out of 7 – 100% of Council) and replace that with access to 1 councilmember and the mayor out of 11 (2 out of 11 – 18% of Council) or 1 district councilmember, 2 at-large councilmembers and the mayor out of 11 (4 out of 11 – 36%)?
- How did you like redistricting on the state level? If you liked that, you'll love it at the City level. Sure, they tell you they'll be an independent board. Appointed by whom? Owing allegiance to whom?
- Why haven't we seen their maps?
- Austin is becoming more and more diverse – it's simply impossible to include any ethnicity into one district – and will be even moreso in the future. That is a worthier goal which Austin has long embraced instead of dividing us up into wards – districts.
- Austin does not have a history of discrimination in the last 40 years at least in who we vote for. To the Austin City Council, we have elected a Black and Hispanic to every Council since 1973. We have also elected people who were gay, blind, Asian, old, young, rich, poor, hippies, businessmen, doctors, lawyers, flower people, men, women, just about every demographic you can name.
- Gonzalo Barrientos was our State Senator for many years. Our current County Judge Sam Biscoe is Black. Gus Garcia was elected Mayor.
- Where is the problem?
- One keeps hearing about how Dallas and Houston are elected by district – are they run better than Austin? In what ways? Do we really aspire to be like Dallas and Houston?

- But the cities we are most often compared to, Portland and Seattle – are never mentioned in this context. Why? It's because they elect their Councilmembers at large, like Austin.
- The School Board elects by district. And we just saw that the residents of an East Austin district didn't want the IDEA school to come in. But somehow, the IDEA people convinced their elected representative that an IDEA school was a good idea for that district. They convince that one person. Then the other district representatives voted for the IDEA school and thus forced it on the district, saying their representative was for it. Who voted against it? The at-large representatives, that's who!
- It's just easier for behind the scenes powerbrokers to persuade one person instead of the whole Council – and the other districts then fall in line.
- Vote No.

Following is An Op-ed that ran in the Austin American-Statesman May 4, 2012:

By Bob Binder

As a former Austin Councilmember, I urge the Council not to burden the City with yet another election – it would be the 7th – on districts in order to divide up our City, Austin, by race and geography.

The people have spoken repeatedly -- 6 times this issue has failed -- and yet this issue keeps being pushed by behind-the-scenes powerbrokers.

Districts are a bad idea. In addition to dividing us up by race and geography, we would have the political spectacle of redistricting periodically to protect the incumbents' positions as population shifts. Watch the Legislature redistricting and gerrymandering Austin from 1 congressional district to 3 and likely now to 4 if you think this is such a good idea. It's politics at its worst.

4 year terms are also being pushed - another bad idea. We should be able to turn someone out of office if they're not doing a good job for us and not be stuck with them for 3 or 4 years. A return to 2 year terms would be a better option. With 4 years, we're stuck with them, no matter how bad they turn out to be. Examples in Texas and national politics abound.

In all the promotion of this, no one puts forth the names of cities which are run better than Austin with districts (wards)? Why is this an improvement? Name them, so we can see how well wards work, and we can compare them to cities with wards that are run much worse than they are. Austin has been doing pretty well for itself without wards and without

shortchanging any area of the City. And Austin has been extremely inclusive on the Council for at least the last 40 years without tinkering.

There is talk of a "gentlemen's agreement" as if it's a fact, even in the Statesman reporting, but if that were true, everyone in Austin would have to agree to it at every election. It is simply not true. Anyone qualified can file for and run for any position. And who has policed it for the 40 years it has supposedly been around? "No one" is the answer, as it does not exist.

Austin has not been racist in electing minorities. Look at our County Judge. Look at our last State Senator. Look at our past mayors.

Blacks and Hispanics are spread throughout the City. How do you find one district to represent each? And what of the other ethnicities? What of genders? And do Blacks and Hispanics who don't live in their designated district not have representation? And why is geography or race such a great way to divide our City up?

Austin is a community, a City legitimately proud of itself as a City, not as a district. People want to come here. We work together as one City, not against one another as a collection of districts bargaining for the best deals for their districts.

Districts allow for fiefdoms and kingmakers to develop, and make it easier to have powerful behind-the-scenes groups dominate the relatively smaller districts. Powerbrokers love the idea.

Does the County run that much better than the City?

The issues in Austin are not geographic. They are Austin-wide, affecting Austin as a whole, even neighborhood issues, because we are a whole -- Austin. And the Councils have thought that way -- and it shows in our wonderful City of Austin. One person should not become king/queen of a district and then bargain only for that district.

Congressman Pickle once told me that every time he brought something home for Austin, it cost 435 times the amount, as he had to vote for something of similar value for someone else's district. It's not cheaper.

Today, a citizen can go to any of all 7 Councilmembers with their concerns. With districts, that's not so -- so, if your district rep disagrees with you, you're out of luck. There would be only 3 Councilmembers to go to. Right now you have 7 chances someone will agree with you and help you. Why give up your right to select 100% of the City governance and change that to your right to vote for just 33% just to make it easier for powerbrokers to take control of districts and for 2/3 of the Council to shut you out?

Austin and Austinites have done well with the current system. It's time to tell the powerbrokers: Austin ain't broke. So stop tryin' to fix it.