

ALESHIRE COMMENTS – DEMOCRATIC FORUM 9-10-12

[FRED LEWIS]

[] I THANK YOU FOR A CHANCE TO EXPLAIN WHY I SUPPORT THE PEOPLE’S PLAN TO ELECT THE CITY COUNCIL FROM 10 DISTRICTS AND THE MAYOR AT LARGE.

[] I VIEW THIS AUSTIN ELECTION FOR SINGLE-MEMBER DISTRICTS TO BE A FUNDAMENTALLY IMPORTANT OPPORTUNITY TO MAKE REAL THE OTHERWISE FALSE IMAGE AUSTIN HAS AS A “HOTBED OF DEMOCRACY.”

[] OH SURE, AUSTIN IS NOTRIOUS FOR HAVING COUNCIL MEETINGS WHERE HUNDREDS OF PEOPLE SHOW UP TO TESTIFY, DRIVING THE MEETINGS PAST MIDNIGHT, BUT THAT IS NOT NECESSARILY A SIGN OF DEMOCRACY--- THAT MAY JUST BE A SIGN THAT THE SYSTEM DOESN’T ELECT COUNCIL MEMBERS IN THE FIRST PLACE WHO ARE ALREADY LISTENING TO THE PEOPLE.

[] UNLIKE SOME OTHER LEVELS OF GOVERNMENT, CITY GOVERNMENT IS VERY NEIGHBORHOOD-BASED, PARTICULARLY WITH ITS ZONING POWER. OUR CITY’S ELECTORAL PROCESS SHOULD, BUT DOES NOT, RECOGNIZE THIS NEIGHBORHOOD ORIENTATION OF CITY GOVERNMENT.

[] WHEN, OVER THE LAST 40 YEARS, MORE THAN ½ OF THE CITY COUNCIL MEMBERS AND 88% OF THE MAYORS HAVE COME FROM ONLY 4 WEST-SIDE ZIP CODES, THE CURRENT AT-LARGE SYSTEM—INSPIRING A WHOPPING 8% VOTER TURNOUT—HAS NOT PRODUCED ANYTHING CLOSE TO NEIGHBORHOOD REPRESENTATION. IN THAT SENSE, WE DON’T HAVE A REAL DEMOCRACY TO CONTROL THE KIND OF POWER THE CITY GOVERNMENT EXERCISES.

[] THE “INSIDERS’ 8-2-1 PLAN” IS DESIGNED TO PROTECT AS MUCH OF THE CURRENT SYSTEM AS THEY THINK THEY NEED, BUT HAVING THAT PLAN ON

THE ALREADY COMPLICATED NOVEMBER BALLOT IS LIKELY TO HURT OUR CHANCE TO GET NEIGHBORHOOD REPRESENTATION AT ALL.

[] AND I BELIEVE THE PATERNALISTIC “GENTLEMEN’S AGREEMENT” TO PERMIT ONE BLACK PERSON AND ONE HISPANIC PERSON ON THE COUNCIL—APPROVED BY THE “GENTLEMEN”—IS NOT ONLY UNDEMOCRATIC BUT ANOTHER EXPRESSION OF BIGOTRY THAT DOES NOT GET ENOUGH EXPOSURE.

[] IF YOU THINK THIS GENTLEMEN’S AGREEMENT PERMITS MORE THAN ONE HISPANIC, ASK MANUEL ZUNIGA WHEN HE TRIED TO GET ON THE COUNCIL OF WHICH GUG GARCIA WAS MAYOR. THE TYPE OF LIBERALISM THAT CONTINUES TO SUPPORT THIS SYSTEM HAS A HEART AS SOLID AS COTTON-CANDY AND IS MORE CONCERNED ABOUT AUSTIN’S IMAGE THAN IN REALLY LETTING EVERY VOTER BE FAIRLY REPRESENTED.

[] WE AMERICANS CLAIM TO HAVE AN ETHICAL VALUE TO RESPECT THE RIGHT TO VOTE—FOR *EVERY* VOTER, AND FOR *EACH* PERSON TO BE REPRESENTED FAIRLY IN GOVERNMENT. I CAN TELL YOU FROM EXPERIENCE, THAT DIVERSITY OF PERSPECTIVE AND OPINION IN GOVERNMENT MAKES US NOT ONLY MORE DEMOCRATIC, BUT IT MAKES DECISIONS BETTER.

[] THIS ETHICAL VALUE IS AT THE HEART OF ONE-PERSON-ONE VOTE;
[] EXPRESSED IN THE REPEAL OF POLL-TAX AND JIM-CROW LAWS;

[] PROMOTED BY RECOGNIZING WOMEN’S RIGHT TO VOTE;
[] AND OFFENDED TODAY BY SINISTER AND CYNICAL OBSTACLES SUCH AS VOTER I.D. LAWS, RESTRICTIONS ON EARLY VOTING TIMES, AND UNPRECEDENTED AMOUNTS A BIG MONEY INFLUENCE IN OUR ELECTIONS.

[] BUT NOWHERE IS THIS ETHICAL VALUE—THIS RESPECT FOR EVERYONE’S RIGHT TO VOTE AND TO BE REPRESENTED FAIRLY—MORE ROUTINELY THREATENED AND SET ASIDE THAN IN DECIDING HOW TO SET UP

THE AREAS FROM WHICH OUR PUBLIC OFFICIALS ARE ELECTED. AND THAT HAS BEEN HISTORICALLY TRUE WHETHER WE HAVE DISTRICTS, HYBRID-DISTRICTS, OR NO DISTRICTS AND REGARDLESS OF WHETHER THE DEMOCRATS OR REPUBLICANS ARE IN CHARGE. THERE, CRASS POLITICS AND POLITICAL SELFISHNESS PREVAIL OVER THIS FUNDAMENTAL ETHICAL VALUE, AND IT'S A SHAME.

[] BUT AS BAD AS REDISTRICTING OF OUR CONGRESS AND LEGISLATURE HAS BEEN IN THE HANDS OF THE TEXAS LEGISLATURE, CAN YOU IMAGINE ELECTING, CONGRESS, THE LEGISLATURE, OR EVEN THE COUNTY COMMISSIONERS COURT, IN AN AT-LARGE SYSTEM? OR EVEN IN A HYBRID SYSTEM?

[] THAT WOULD MAKE ABOUT AS MUCH SENSE AS CONTINUING THE UNIQUE AT-LARGE SYSTEM WE HAVE IN AUSTIN. LOOK AROUND, WE'RE THE ONLY LARGE CITY IN TEXAS WITH THIS AT-LARGE FACADE OF DEMOCRACY.

[] LOGICALLY, THERE IS NOTHING SO SPECIAL ABOUT THE AUSTIN CITY COUNCIL THAT WHATEVER ARGUMENTS THERE ARE FOR AT-LARGE ELECTIONS FOR THAT CITY COUNCIL WOULD NOT ALSO APPLY TO EVERY OTHER LEGISLATIVE BODY.

[] LIKE MANY OF YOU, I WAS PUMPED UP WATCHING THE DEMOCRATIC CONVENTION LAST WEEK. AND AS I WAS PREPARING FOR THIS TALK, AND RECALLING JULIAN CASTRO'S SPEECH AT THE CONVENTION, I WONDERED WHETHER HE WOULD HAVE BEEN THERE OR BEEN MAYOR OF SAN ANTONIO IF HE'D HAD TO FIRST GET ELECTED TO THE COUNCIL IN AN AT-LARGE SYSTEM.

[] YOU SEE, JULIAN CASTRO WAS FIRST ELECTED TO THE CITY COUNCIL THERE FROM ONE OF THE 10 SINGLE-MEMBER DISTRICTS COMPRISING THE SAN ANTONIO COUNCIL.

[] LIKE JULIAN CASTRO, HENRY CISNEROS WAS FIRST ELECTED TO ONE OF THOSE 10 SMD'S BEFORE HE BECAME MAYOR.

I'VE GOT LOTS OF REASONS TO SUPPORT IT, BUT IN THE INTEREST OF TIME, HERE ARE MY TOP 5 REASONS FOR SUPPORTING THE PEOPLE'S 10-1 PLAN:

1. NEIGHBORHOOD DISTRICTS CREATE AN OPPORTUNITY, THAT TODAY DOES NOT EXIST IN AUSTIN, FOR CANDIDATES TO WIN A GRASS-ROOTS, DOOR-TO-DOOR CAMPAIGN—WHICH ENCOURAGES A BETTER TURNOUT—AND FOR CANDIDATES TO GET FREE OF THE BIG SPECIAL-INTEREST-MONEY BUNDLING SYSTEM THAT HAS DOMINATED AUSTIN'S CITYWIDE ELECTIONS.
2. HAVING COUNCIL MEMBERS WHO LIVE CLOSER TO THEIR CONSTITUENTS MAKES IT MORE LIKELY THAT THOSE COUNCIL MEMBERS WILL PERSONALLY SHARE AND BETTER UNDERSTAND THE REAL-LIFE PERSPECTIVE THAT VOTERS IN THAT NEIGHBORHOOD HAVE. IN OTHER WORDS, IN A 10-1 PLAN, COUNCIL MEMBERS WILL LIVE MORE LIKE THEIR CONSTITUENTS LIVE.
3. THEN HAVING A COUNCIL WITH MEMBERS FROM DIVERSE PERSPECTIVES, CHALLENGED TO ARRIVE AT DECISIONS FOR THE COMMON GOOD, IS HEALTHY, SMART, AND MORE REPRESENTATIVE OF THE WHOLE CITY IN THE FINAL ANALYSIS, THAN IS THE CURRENT SYSTEM. AS COUNTY JUDGE, I LEARNED A LOT AND CHANGED MY PERSPECTIVE BY LISTENING TO COUNTY COMMISSIONERS ABOUT CONDITIONS IN THEIR PRECINCTS—TO WHICH THEY WERE CLOSER—AND THEY LEARNED FROM EACH OTHER.
4. CURRENTLY, EACH COUNCIL MEMBER HAS ABOUT 800,000 CONSTITUENTS, AND THE 10-1 PLAN MAKES IT FAR MORE FEASIBLE FOR A COUNCIL MEMBER TO BE ABLE LISTEN TO AND ACTUALLY REPRESENT A MORE REASONABLE SIZE CONSTITUENCY.
5. UNLIKE THE POLITICIANS' 8-2-1 PLAN, THE PEOPLE'S 10-1 PLAN WAS THE

RESULT OF THE COUNCIL'S OWN PROCESS FOR RECOMMENDATIONS FROM A CITIZENS' COMMISSION—CHAired BY GONZALO BARRIENTOS— AS WELL AS A SUBSEQUENT PETITION DRIVE, WITH OVER 22,000 SIGNATURES OF AUSTIN VOTERS, THAT HAS ACHIEVED UNPRECEDENTED BROAD-BASED SUPPORT. NO SUCH PETITION OR BROAD COALITION WAS PRESENT IN THE PAST ELECTIONS ON SINGLE MEMBER DISTRICTS IN AUSTIN.

I ASK YOU TO RESPECT, AND TO JOIN, THIS COALITION TO UPHOLD THE ETHICAL VALUE OF FAIR REPRESENTATION FOR EVERY NEIGHBORHOOD IN AUSTIN.

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