

Press Conference Statements on the Formation of Vote No At-Large, 9/22/2004

Statement 1: Ben Grosser

I have asked you here today in order to announce the formation of an organization called “Vote No At-Large.” I am joined by members of this organization, residents from all over Urbana, who have united to oppose the addition of at-large seats to the Urbana city council.

The addition of at-large seats to local government will push our city in the wrong direction. In fact, cities all over the United States have been *removing* at-large seats from their city councils—not adding them. Over 250 cities recently eliminated at-large seats from their councils, making this one of the most commonly proposed and approved changes to the structure of local government nationwide.¹ Right here in central Illinois, both Springfield and Danville eliminated at-large seats in favor of ward-style elections. And most recently, the voters of Urbana themselves voted to change the school board from at-large to districts.

The addition of at-large seats to the Urbana city council will not result in better government. Instead, it will produce representatives that are out of touch with the citizens, and obligated to special interests. Because at-large elections are run city-wide, they will force campaigns to replace personal contact with media saturation. This change will require large financial contributions. As a result, we can be sure that the average citizen will be discouraged from running for these seats because they’ll be unable to compete with big-money candidates.

At-large seats will not be an improvement for Urbana because they increase the representation for some at the expense of others. At-large systems dilute the minority vote. This has been proven time and again in study after study, making it one of the most verified generalizations in the field of political science.²

Here in Urbana, 1/7th of our city council is African-American, just as 1/7th of our population is African-American. Since at-large seats almost never elect minority candidates, we can be assured that at-large would dilute minority representation in our city government. And this disparity would grow over time, as African-Americans are on track to make up 1/5th of Urbana’s population within the next 10 years.³

¹ *Municipal Year Book*. 2004. International City/County Management Association (ICMA), Washington, D.C.

² The conclusion that at-large dilutes minority representation is extremely well-supported in the literature, illustrated by cross-sectional and longitudinal studies performed over the last 35 years, and published in peer-reviewed journals in political and social science. For one sample, see: Engstrom, Richard and Michael McDonald. 1986. “The Effect of At-Large Versus District Elections on Racial Representation in U.S. Municipalities.” In *Electoral Laws and Their Political Consequences*. Bernard Grofman and Arend Lijphart eds. New York: Agathon Press.

³ Data from the U.S. Census, years 1970, 1980, 1990, and 2000. Presumes a projected curve that fits the last forty years worth of data.

When at-large was first proposed, my initial reaction was one of skepticism. But it was not until I read the work of scholars who have spent their lives studying this topic that I became fully convinced of the damage that awaits Urbana if the ballot question passes. This question was rushed onto the ballot in the 11th hour. There was no formal study. There was no public hearing. We shouldn't change the structure of government on a whim.

Urbana needs effective city government—we have serious problems and we need serious answers. But the addition of at-large seats is not the answer. Cities all over the nation have been *removing* at-large seats, and Urbana shouldn't turn back the clock.⁴

Each and every seat on the city council, as well as the mayor's position will be up for reelection this Spring. We ask our friends and neighbors to vote for candidates that will work tirelessly for their wards, and to elect a mayor with a strong vision for the future of Urbana.

Vote No At-Large does not oppose *all* changes in the structure of government—we simply want such changes to be well-considered and supported by the facts. There has been extensive research into alternative electoral systems, and we would welcome the city to explore this topic in depth, with the goal of adopting whichever system proves to benefit *all* of its citizens equally. We encourage our fellow citizens to take a look at these facts, and to then vote “no” on this ballot question.

⁴ “The second most commonly considered change [in municipal government structures nationwide] was to eliminate at-large seats on the council and replace them with ward or district elections.” (first was changing the formal structure of government—i.e. adding a CAO) (Municipal Year Book, 2004).

Statement 2: Laura Haber

I served on the Urbana School Board from 1995-2003. When I was first elected it was under an at-large system. Then with the referendum to change to the election of school board members to election by sub-district, I ran twice under the sub-district system (similar to a ward system of electing city council members). Because I have had the unique experience of having been elected to public office under both an at-large and a sub-district system, I think that I can offer a useful perspective on how the different systems affected accountability and diversity on the school board and by extension how they could potentially affect the city council.

When the School Board changed to election by sub-district, I was living in the sub-district on the North side of town which is made up of a substantial number of African-Americans, low-income families, and students. In order to get elected under this system, I had to knock on doors and talk one-on-one with people in my community. I had to listen to their concerns and articulate a vision that would be responsive to their needs and the needs of their children. Once I was elected, I had to continue to listen to the people that I represented and when there was a problem, they knew who to call. They could develop a relationship with one person who they knew was there to listen to them. And if they didn't like how I was representing them, they could elect someone else.

When we were elected under an at-large system, not only didn't I *need* to go door-to-door on the North side, *no one did*. No one *had to be* accountable to people on the North side. Not only was it possible to win an at-large seat *without* spending a lot of time talking to African Americans, low-income voters or students—*it was the most efficient way to win*. Instead of spending time going door-to-door talking to people who may not have voted before, who might not feel well-served by current systems, who might not already be mobilized and involved, the best way to win an at-large election was to chase after the votes of people who were already mobilized, who already had a voice.

When the Urbana School Board moved to election by sub-district, I was dubious. Partly because I think changes in government are very serious and should be entered into with great care and deliberation. But also because elections in Urbana hadn't been big money affairs. But all I needed to do was look to our neighbors in Champaign to see the potential hazards of an at-large system. There we saw candidates spending thousands of dollars on billboards and yard-signs, the triumph of money and gloss over dialogue and accountability.

Anyone who is elected under an at-large system will be impelled to run larger, less responsive campaigns than their ward counterparts. If we want to maintain a system in which people have to talk to their neighbors in order to win, in which everyone—no matter how wealthy or well-connected—has an equal chance at representation, and in which an election cannot be bought by high gloss, content-free advertising, we must think small. We must maintain election by wards in Urbana city government.

Statement 3: Phyllis Clark

The Voting Rights Act of 1965 enacted a number of changes that were meant to empower minorities to vote and gain equal representation. A common method used to negate the minority vote, both before and after the Voting Rights Act, was to use at-large representation for local government. At-large seats have been extremely effective in diluting the minority vote because they require citywide campaigning as opposed to district-wide. Minorities are more likely to elect a candidate as long as they can be sure their neighborhood is equally represented.

The evidence against at-large representation is overwhelming and striking, to say the least:

In 1987, a group of African-Americans filed a minority vote dilution lawsuit against the city of Springfield, seeking the city's compliance with the Voting Rights Act. As a result, our Capital City eliminated its at-large system in favor of a ward system – like we have here in Urbana. The outcome being that the first African-American was elected to that body since 1911.

Also in 1987, a similar lawsuit was brought against the city of Danville. At that time in the city's history, every elected council member since the city was founded was all male and all Caucasian. The city settled the lawsuit by eliminating at-large representation and adopting the ward system – again, like we have in Urbana. Since they removed the at-large system, the city has elected 5 African-Americans, 8 women, a Latino and a person of Native-American descent. Danville, with 20+% African-American population, has now had two African-Americans on the council at all times.

In 1998, the citizens of Urbana voted to eliminate at-large seats from the school board in favor of district elections. Subsequently, the first African-American was elected to serve on that body in 20 years.

I am a minority candidate who has won election to a citywide office; I am the first minority elected citywide in Urbana in 171 years. I am not the norm. At-large seats rarely elect minorities.

Should this ballot question be voted in, it will truly disenfranchise the minority community once again as well as disenfranchising the student population. At present the wards are as equally split as possible, **Ward 1** with **5,370** residents; **Ward 2** with **5,287** residents; **Ward 3** with **5,234** residents; **Ward 4** with **4,909** residents; **Ward 5** with **5,377** residents; **Ward 6** with **5,165** residents; and **Ward 7** with **5,207** residents.

As such, I urge my fellow citizens to vote “NO” on the question of at-large City Council seats.

Statement 4: Mort Brussel

Do I, as a resident of southeast Urbana, deserve a greater voice in government than a person who lives on Bradley Avenue? Of course not. But the central argument in support of at-large elections is that people who live in wards with higher voter turnout deserve a greater voice in government. This notion is unconstitutional.

Despite the fact that Urbana's wards have equal populations, four times as many people voted in the last city election in my ward (ward 7) than in Ward 3. At-large advocates say equal representation of the two wards on city council is unfair.

But imagine if we applied that philosophy to the state legislature. The 100th Representative District, which surrounds Springfield, had 48,000 voters turnout in the last election—almost twice the number of people who voted in our 103rd District! Does this mean Champaign-Urbana voters deserve less representation than Springfield does in the Illinois House of Representatives? What about the 3rd Representative District, a predominantly Latino district where only 11,000 people voted in the last House race? Do the people of the 100th Representative District deserve 4 times as much representation as the people of the 3rd District? Not according to the U.S. Constitution. The constitutional principle of one person, one vote is that representation in government must be based on population, not on voter turnout.⁵

I do not believe that my vote should count more than others, and I ask my fellow neighbors to vote “no” on the ballot question.

⁵ The concept of “one person, one vote” is supported by Article I, Section II, and by the 14th Amendment (Equal Protection Clause) of the U.S. Constitution.

Statement 4 (conclusion): Ben Grosser

The proponents of at-large feel that some citizens deserve more representation than others. Their goal is to divide east and west Urbana citizens, but its not going to work. We've only been working on this a couple weeks, and the response has been overwhelming. Dozens of residents of east and south Urbana have already signed up to oppose at-large—and more are signing on every day.

And its not just individuals getting involved. A *group* that has just signed on to oppose at-large in Urbana is the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People. I'm happy to announce that the Champaign County NAACP unanimously passed a resolution last night that declares their support for the voting rights of all residents of Urbana, that recognizes that at-large seats dilute minority representation, and encouraging a NO vote on this ballot question in November.

While it is questionable whether at-large seats would provide any benefit to the city, it is certainly not a question that it will provide many detriments to the city. In contrast, the ward system in Urbana preserves minority votes in city elections. It prevents big money interests from buying council seats. It provides direct and fair representation to all citizens of the city.

Vote No At-Large is an organization rooted in the facts, and committed to the well-being of the city of Urbana. We urge our fellow citizens to vote “no” to at-large seats.