

On the Referendum to Add Two At-Large Urbana Council Members

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The opinions and arguments below are based on news stories that appeared earlier this summer. I have not seen recent discussions by the referendum proponents so my comments are perforce based on earlier impressions. I do not favor passing this referendum. Here are some of my reasons. Your questions are welcome.

1. **The current political governmental structure in Urbana is sound.** Is the present system really broken? Despite a few—literally a very few instances—in which the Council and the Mayor have been in disagreement, almost none of these has had an impact on East Urbana. Members of that part of our community have voiced concern about being under-represented. This is a false argument. There is a fundamental difference between equal representation and exercising one's voting franchise. (See reprint of article from The News-Gazette.) In the case of Urbana, under both the existing and proposed ward maps, populations are roughly equal in all wards. Each ward is represented by a single alderman regardless of the percentage of voter turnout in an election. Wards with heavy voter participation are not awarded an extra Council member, nor are they legally entitled to one.
2. **Growth is occurring not just in East Urbana, but also elsewhere in the City.** Arguments have been made that the growth rate in East Urbana is greater than in other areas of the city. However, new apartments are springing up north along Lincoln Avenue which are increasing population in that area. New large apartment complexes continue to be added to the area around the University campus with the same effect. It is important for all of us to keep in mind that the law requires the use of the latest census figures when we configure ward maps. Special census figures may also be used for this purpose. Although proponents of the referendum seem to endorse using population projections for redistricting purposes, maps based on such speculation will not stand up to a legal challenge.
3. **The fact that four current members of the Urbana City Council live near each other does not justify changing the form of Government.** There are complaints that four members of the Council live relatively close to each other. Where one lives, a personal matter, is an irrelevant argument as long as one resides within appropriate ward boundaries. For example, since 1981 Urbana's Fifth Ward has had roughly 85 % of its population living east of Vine Street. Yet from the 1979 election forward, every winning Fifth Ward Council candidate, whether Democrat or Republican (and there have been both during this period), has lived west of Vine Street, although some candidates have lived east of Vine. How does one explain this? Perhaps those living east of Vine felt the strongest candidate lived to the west. Or, perhaps voter turnout was higher west of Vine. Possibly, folks on both sides of Vine have more in common than proponents of this ill-advised proposal would have us believe. Three of the four U. S. Senators currently

representing Illinois and Wisconsin live within approximately 150 miles of one another. Wouldn't it be outrageous for voters in the two states living further away to demand additional Senate representation because of this?

4. **Small districts enable Council members to be in better contact with the people they represent.** The small size of Urbana wards makes it possible for persons running for the Council to literally stop by each voter's home and meet with the residents. Establishing rapport with constituents will be a serious problem for anyone running for an at-large seat. When referenda were held in the past about merging Urbana and Champaign, one argument many Urbana residents made against such a merger was that they preferred a citizens' government, where the representatives come from the people, know the people, respond to the people. At-large Council members will find it more difficult to have this kind of relationship with a constituency consisting of the entire City.
5. **Money has never been a major factor in running for the City Council but may become one for the at-large seats.** In 1967, I ran my first aldermanic election for about \$70, translating to today's prices to perhaps somewhat less than \$500. Back then, running in just one ward, I was able to campaign door-to-door. I believe then, and still do, that such campaigning is invaluable in establishing rapport with one's constituents. To run at-large will make this impossible (unless a candidate has the financial resources that would allow him to campaign full-time for several months) and create a situation where money will be a much greater factor in a Council election than it is now. Given the costs of my second Mayoral campaign in 1977 and projecting to today's costs, I estimate that in a competitive race, a campaign based mainly on advertising and heavy mailings would cost around \$20,000.

From a political science perspective, it would be interesting to see how an at-large election in Urbana would go if one candidate tried to win through the expenditure of much money, while the other relied on a more extensive network of door-to-door campaign workers. Who would win—a candidate with large resources or a candidate with enthusiastic volunteer workers?

6. **Students who live in Urbana are residents of Urbana and have the right to vote and have representation in Urbana.** Some arguments heard during the summer hold that "permanent" residents should have a greater voice than student residents and that the former have more at stake in the community than the latter. One can understand the emotional background for such arguments, but are they really valid reasons for going to at-large elections? It is true that there is more rapid turnover among the student population than among most other classes of residents, but students do have a real interest in the quality of life in this community. They represent a significant percentage of Urbana's population, and by law they have the right to the same level of representation as all other residents. In past years, students have been elected to and served honorably on the Urbana City Council and can still do so if they wish to become more active at the local level. Indeed, they have the same opportunity to participate in local government as non-student residents living in the Fifth Ward east of Vine Street.
7. **Unintended consequences.**

- **Power and control.** Winners of at-large seats will have no more power than other Council members, yet their costs for the privilege of serving will be considerably higher. Will such individuals feel entitled to speak for the general populace in the same manner as the Mayor by virtue of their mode of election? Will we have three people who feel they are all equally entitled to “speak for all the people.”
- **Efforts to make changes in our form of government have had various degrees of success.** In 1974, under its Home Rule powers, the City created the position of Administrative Officer (AO) giving the person in that position much responsibility for the City’s day-to-day administrative operation. This person operates and serves solely at the pleasure of the Mayor. Many people, including me, think the creation of this position has been proven to be good for Urbana, although some believe that the Administrative Officer has too much authority. For this person to be most effective, it is vital that the AO be isolated from the political byplay that often occurs among the elected officials. That was a strict rule in my administration, although in recent years there have been charges that this has not always been the case.
- **Reduction of the size of the City Council.** In 1979, a referendum was passed to reduce the size of the Urbana City Council from fourteen members (two per ward) to seven members (one per ward), effective with the 1981 election. Many argued that this would be a great improvement since Council meetings would become shorter and end earlier (they have) with fewer people on the Council, but was representation improved by this action? Some residents east of Vine Street obviously don’t think so today.
- **Past re-drawings of ward maps have had interesting impacts on the City government – and sometimes major unintended consequences.** Until the last quarter of the 20th Century, Republicans dominated the political life of the City of Urbana. What changed this? In 1970, the Republican-dominated City Council redrew ward boundaries. The new map was based on 1960 census figures and was primarily designed to create a safe ward for the Republican son of one of the Council’s sitting members, a young man with definite political ambitions. The new ward map achieved its goal and the young political aspirant won a seat on the Council. Ironically, there were also some very important long-term effects from this particular redistricting. The demographics of Urbana had been slowly changing during the decade of the 60’s and the new map, designed to meet a short-term agenda, diluted Republican strength in other wards. This, along with a population increasingly voting Democratic, created opportunities for more Democratic candidates to be elected. Two years later, when the ward map was modified again, this time using 1970 census figures, Democrats won the majority of seats on the City Council. In every City election since that time, Democrats have maintained their Council majority. Moreover, the total vote cast city-wide for Democratic Council candidates has exceeded that for Republican candidates. Creating two at-large seats may not have the consequences hoped for by the proponents of this referendum.

8. There are other possible changes in the form of government that perhaps should be considered before adopting, or even voting on, the present proposal. Many citizens

feel that a careful study of alternatives to the present proposal should have been considered before rushing to ask the people to pass a referendum. One idea is to use the City's Home Rule Powers to present a referendum to change the number of Council seats from seven to eight. This would have the effect of giving each citizen a bit more voice in city government, and would result in a Council in which the Mayor at times would have the opportunity to cast a tie-breaking vote, as was the case when the City had an even number of Council members. Other possibilities include the option of having a true City Manager form of government. During the period of 1969-1973, Mayor Charles Zipprodt, with the cooperation of the Council, established a Commission to study ways of improving the system of government for Urbana. The main impact of that study resulted in the creation of the Administrative Officer position. Currently, however, a small group of citizens exercising their rights has presented a sole alternative and the people in November will decide whether this is something they will accept or reject. Regardless of the outcome of the vote on the present referendum, the Mayor and Council could establish a Commission to study the overall structure of government for Urbana, although at this time if the referendum fails, I do not see the need for having a Commission.

9. Form of Government should not be changed because of petty political conflicts. The referendum reducing Council size in 1979 was a reaction to extraordinarily long Council meetings during several preceding years. Council members, although urged to hold shorter meetings or adjourn at an earlier hour, refused to do so (Council Rules required a two-third's vote to change the appropriate rule). Now, with great political differences (and this is not a Republican versus Democratic problem) and personal frictions among the City's elected officials, we are being asked to change the structure of our government. What would really be more appropriate is to change one or more of those elected officials through the present electoral process. Imagine efforts to change the U. S. form of government because many people object to Tom DeLay or Edward Kennedy. Regardless of the structure of Urbana City government, changing the number of Council members will not cure the present problem of sharp political and personal differences among elected officials. Indeed, adding two more at-large members, each viewing him or herself as having the same voice as the Mayor, may only exacerbate the views of some of the proponents of the referendum. Elected officials at the City level do have a responsibility to the entire City, but they also have a more direct responsibility to the people who elected them, even if people outside of their wards dislike their votes and actions.

Hiram Paley served in Urbana City Government as an alderman during 1967-1973 and Mayor during 1973-1977. He retired in 1998 from his faculty position in the Department of Mathematics at the University of Illinois where he now has emeritus status. He has served on boards of a number of local community organizations.