

Rationale for Maintaining At-large Voting in Everett

Prepared for
Everett Charter Review Committee
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By Michael Swanson

Introduction: First of all, I would like to thank Megan Dunn for the presentation she made previously to the Charter Review Committee on the topic of districting. This is exactly the type of work the Charter Review Committee should be doing – discussing the pros and cons of various suggestions and then ultimately deciding which proposals merit advancement to the Everett City Council. Having an open and objective conversation is healthy – and this committee is the appropriate venue for that discussion.

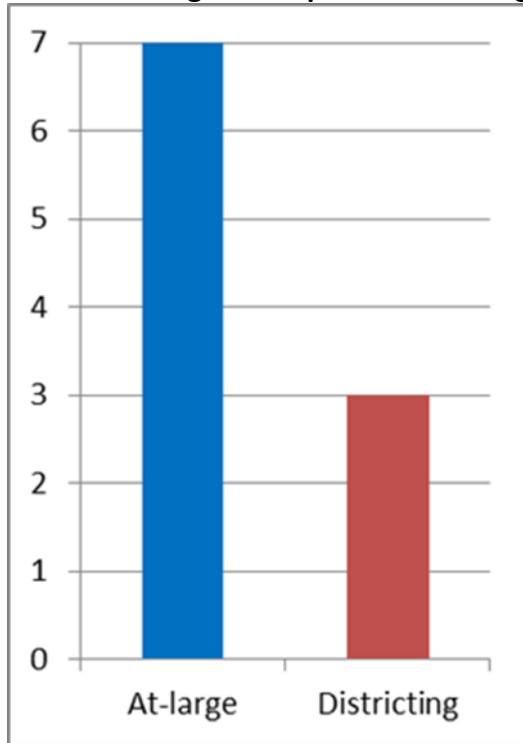
This report outlines why – at this time – having districts is not the right plan for our city. I don't claim to be an expert on the topic of districting and have cited sources throughout the report where applicable.

The following is a compilation of some of the top concerns to districting I have come to recognize while independently researching the topic, listening to the conversations we've shared as a committee, and my own observations as an Everett resident. I look forward to hearing feedback from the rest of the committee on this topic.

1

Districting would reduce choices for all Everett voters.

Everett Voter Choices
Current At-Large vs Proposed Districting.



With the current at-large system, Everett voters are empowered to vote in all 7 city council races.

At-large also allows candidates to run for any of the 7 positions.

Allowing candidates to run for ANY of the 7 seats means *“better-qualified individuals are elected to the council because the candidate pool is larger.”*
(National League of Cities, Municipal Elections)

Districting, as proposed (5 districts/2 at-large) would reduce the number of council districts voters may participate in from 7 to 3.

How your ballot would change with districting in upcoming elections (hypothetical).

	Current At-Large	Proposed Districting
2017	Position 1 Position 2 Position 3	At-large 1
2019	Position 4 Position 5 Position 6 Position 7	At-large 2 District #

The current at-large system allows Everett voters to vote in 3 or 4 city council races every two years. With districting, this figure shrinks to 1 or 2 races every two years, reducing the opportunities Everett voters have to make decisions on who will represent them at their municipal level of government.

2

Our current at-large system already supports diversity.

- Two of the longest serving councilmembers in Everett's history are minorities.
- Current council is 3 women and 4 men.
- Professional backgrounds of the current council represent for-profit business, non-profit, education, art, and government sectors.
- The at-large system has a history of electing councilmembers from all corners of the city (see Drew Nielsen's report and updated addendum from Scott Bader, distributed at prior meeting).

If there is a deficiency in a particular area, the solution is to encourage candidates that would bring diversity and balance to the council to run for office.

For most of the past decade, only one woman served on the council. The public took note of the deficiency, supported additional women in 2014 and 2015, and now the council has greater balance of gender. The voters responded to a need. The problem wasn't that voters would not allow women on the council; the problem was there just weren't many women running.

Similarly, if more geographic diversity is desired, the simplest approach is to find qualified candidates from underrepresented areas and encourage them to run. We've seen from Drew Nielsen's report and Scott Bader's addendum that candidates from South Everett can win when they run. But I can 100% guarantee that they will not win if they do not run in the first place.

Finding candidates that bring balance to the council as a whole – whatever the deficiency may be at a given point in time – will be even harder if we restrict the pool of candidates eligible to run for each position.

3

South Everett already has an electoral advantage.

If geographic diversity is an overriding priority for voters, wouldn't more candidates from South Everett run under the campaign slogan of "Elect me – I'm from South Everett"? A majority of Everett voters live south of 41st Street and sheer math would give these candidates an electoral advantage, if geographic diversity were truly a priority for Everett voters.

In the 2015 General Election, ballots cast south of 41st Street compromised 66.45% of all ballots cast in Everett.

	Precincts	Reg. Voters	Ballots Cast	% Turnout	% of Everett Vote
North of 41st	27	15,006	5,356	35.69%	33.55%
South of 41st	68	34,807	10,607	30.47%	66.45%
Total Everett	95	49,813	15,963	32.05%	100.00%

Data Source: Snohomish County Auditor's Office, November 2015 General Election Results

While it's true that North Everett has a higher turnout percentage, more ballots are actually cast South of 41st. The point is, if South Everett voters wanted to increase their numbers on the council – they could do so as early as the next election and with a commanding electoral advantage.

Historically, Everett voters have shown they care about much more than just where the candidates reside.

4

Voters consider many factors when voting.

Geographic diversity is only one factor voters may – or may not – find important when casting their ballot.

The League of Women Voters offers the following recommendations on their website of “How to Judge a Candidate.” Voters are encouraged to consider:

- Positions candidates take on issues
- Leadership Qualities
- Experience candidates would bring to office

“Your first step in picking a candidate is to decide the issues you care about and the qualities you want in a leader.” (<http://lww.org/content/how-judge-candidate>)

The above quote is very important because it underscores the importance of recognizing that we, as voters, all have different considerations that we find of importance when voting.

For some voters, gender diversity may be an area of primary importance. For others, ethnicity may be an area of utmost importance. There really is no right or wrong answer.

The at-large system allows voters to decide what is most important to them in a particular election, whereas districting reduces the pool of eligible candidates for each race, thus, mandating to the voters that geographic diversity is an overriding priority above all other considerations.

I believe this is a key point: **Districting mandates geographic diversity as an overriding priority, while the at-large system gives the voters freedom to decide what is of paramount importance to them.**

5

Districting would narrow the focus of councilmembers.

The current at large-system allows councilmembers to work collaboratively towards objectives that benefit the city at large.

“Council members in an at-large system can be more impartial, rise above the limited perspective of a single district and concern themselves with the problems of the whole community.” (National League of Cities, Municipal Elections)

Districting narrows the focus of councilmembers because they are only dependent on the voters in their immediate district for re-election.

Consider Congress, where every representative wants to “bring home the bacon.” The district becomes the top priority. Votes are traded. Comprehensive, overall vision, is lost.

With at-large systems, *“vote trading between councilmembers is minimized.”*
(National League of Cities, Municipal Elections)

Also concerning is that *“...councils elected by district elections may experience more infighting and be less likely to prioritize the good of the city over the good of their district.”* (National League of Cities, Municipal Elections)

(<http://www.nlc.org/build-skills-and-networks/resources/cities-101/city-officials/municipal-elections>)

Think there is a North/South divide in Everett now? Think about how much worse it would be if we created competing political districts within the city.

It’s important to keep councilmembers “politically dependent” on votes from all corners of the city so that they remain focused on big picture – comprehensive solutions that are in the best interest of all citizens.

6

Districting would not reduce the fundraising barrier.

Districting would have little, if any, impact on leveling the playing field when it comes to fundraising.

Candidates capable of raising campaign contributions in an at-large system will still have access to those resources if running in a smaller district and, conversely, candidates who were not able to successfully fundraise in an at-large system may still struggle to raise funds running in a smaller district race.

Even if running in a smaller district, many campaign expenses are fixed (i.e. not scalable to the size of the district). For example:

- Filing Fee (1% of salary)
- Media Buys (Newspaper, online ads, cable tv)
- Website
- Phone
- Parade/Event Entry Fees

...would all be approximately the same whether running in a district of 21,000 or 105,000.

For scalable campaign expenses (e.g. direct mail, yard signs, printed materials, etc), well-funded candidates would simply send more mail pieces to the district or find other ways to deploy the cash.

In reality, a candidate with the capacity to raise \$25,000 for his or her citywide campaign is not going to scale back and say, “well, I’m only going to accept \$5,000 in donations now that I’m running in only 20% of the city.”

Candidates who can raise \$25,000 for an at-large race are still going to raise \$25,000 for a district race and have a fundraising advantage over a candidate that may not have as much financial support in the community.

7

Current system allows for equitable allocation of resources throughout the community at large.

One of the arguments proponents of districting have made is that city resources are not allocated equitably by the at-large system.

The concentration of amenities in the North end can be easily explained by the history and natural geography of the city. The city was founded in the North and due to natural barriers like the Snohomish River and Puget Sound the city has grown primarily in one direction: South. That explains why city hall and many of the older public amenities are concentrated in the North end.

Over the years, the city has appropriately added amenities as the city has grown to the South (e.g. fire/police stations, parks, golf course, library branch, road improvements, Everett Mall, utilities, infrastructure, etc.).

I'm not going to spend much time on this point but I would like to talk briefly about my own experience on the Board of Park Commissioners for the past 4 years. Part of why I find the charge of inequity of resources flawed is because I have seen first-hand how hard the city works to make sure resources are equitably distributed.

Right now, the Parks Department is working on a Park, Recreation, and Open Space (PROS) plan to take inventory on existing amenities throughout the city so that resources can be allocated in the areas where there is the most need. Where deficiencies are found, recommendations are made to allocate resources to this particular area.

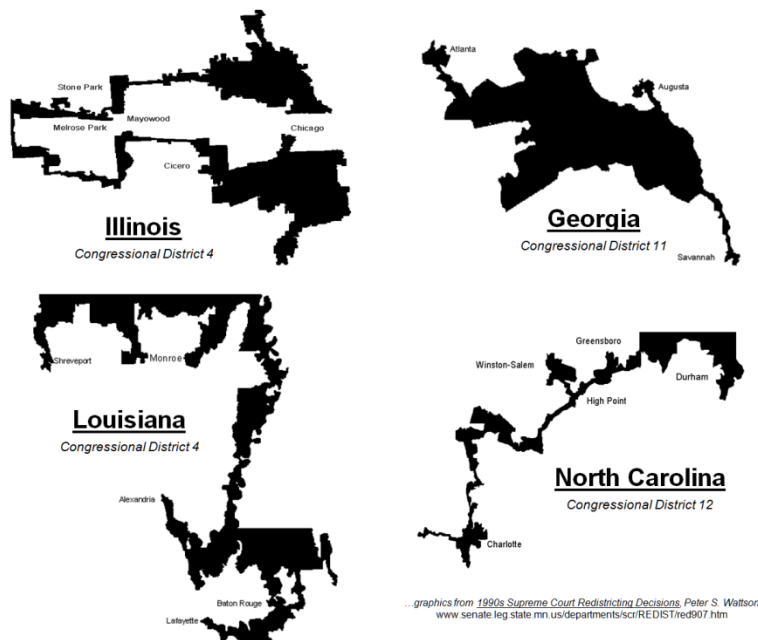
What does the Parks Department's PROS Plan have to do with districting? My point is to give a glimpse into the efforts the city council, city staff, and citizen commissions are already taking to make sure resources are allocated equitably.

8

One word: Gerrymandering.

Type “gerrymandering” into Google Images and you’ll be treated to some truly obscene examples of how district lines can evolve over time to protect officeholders. Now, I fully concede that these are worse-case scenarios and likely would not occur in Everett for non-partisan positions, but at the same time this begs the question of, “who sets the lines?” If we adopted a districting system, how would we ensure that districts are drawn impartially, and free of political expediency? How would we make sure councilmembers don’t use their influence in future redistrictings to carve out districts for their own benefit?

These four congressional districts are examples of gerrymandering pushed to the extreme, but the question is still one that would need to be addressed to ensure impartiality and fairness in how the lines would be re-drawn in the future.



There are also plenty of examples in Federal and State redistrictings where incumbents have been intentionally drawn into the same district as a means of eliminating political rivals. **How would we keep the politics out of an inherently political process?**

9

Everett ≠ Yakima ≠ Seattle ≠ Tacoma.

Throughout this commission's conversations, Everett has been compared to electoral systems in a number of other cities throughout Washington. Each city is unique and it is unfair to make apples-to-apples comparisons with other cities without understanding the background and rationale for each city's decision to adopt their various electoral systems.

Yakima is a poor comparable for Everett. Yakima had systemic problems where minorities were unable to win election to their city council and had been demonstrated over many election cycles. That is not the case in Everett where the citizens have a proud history of electing candidates from a variety of backgrounds. **In Everett, there is no evidence that anyone has ever been denied a seat on the council by where they live or their racial heritage.**

Seattle and Tacoma are also poor comparables given the obvious size differences in population. Seattle (pop 668,342) is 6.5x the size of Everett and Tacoma's population (205,159) is nearly twice the size of Everett's.

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_cities_in_Washington

10

At-large council elections are common for cities Everett's size.

But if we are going to compare Everett against other similarly-sized cities, rest assured we are in-line on both a national and state perspective.

Breakdown of Types of City Council Elections by City Size (2001)

	Small (25,000-69,999)	Medium (70,000-199,999)	Large (200,000 and up)
All At-Large	48.9%	43.7%	16.4%
Mixed	25.0%	25.4%	38.2%
All District	26.1%	31.0%	45.5%

Svara, James H. *Two Decades of Continuity and Change in American City Councils*. Washington, DC: National League of Cities, 2003.

Most US cities Everett's size (about 44%) have all at-large city council elections. If you were to drill down further on this range, we could reasonably assume the smaller cities in this range, like Everett at 106,736, would be even more prone to use all at-large elections and the cities closer to the top of the range would find a greater prevalence of mixed and district systems.

Top WA Cities by Population & Council Composition (per Wikipedia)

Rank	City	Population	District/Ward	At-large	Total Council
1	Seattle	668,342	7	2	9
2	Spokane	212,052	6	0	6
3	Tacoma	205,159	5	3	8
4	Vancouver	169,294	0	7	7
5	Bellevue	136,426	0	7	7
6	Kent	125,560	0	7	7
7	Everett	106,736	0	7	7
8	Renton	98,404	0	7	7
9	Federal Way	93,425	0	7	7
10	Yakima	93,357	4	3	7
11	Spokane Valley	91,729	0	7	7
12	Kirkland	85,763	0	7	7

Turning locally, the chart to the left shows Everett is in-line with similarly sized cities in the State of Washington.

Cities with populations of 200,000 or more are more likely to use district elections. (National League of Cities, Municipal Elections) (<http://www.nlc.org/build-skills-and-networks/resources/cities-101/city-officials/municipal-elections>)

Looking forward, even if Everett's population continues to grow at 3% annually, our population would reach 143,444, ten years from now and still be well below the 200,000 threshold.