



**Task Force on  
Elected Representation**

**FINAL REPORT & FINDINGS**



# Overview

The Grand Rapids City Commission appointed the Task Force on Elected Representation (TFER) to evaluate four voter-initiated proposals to change municipal elections in the City. We, as the members of the TFER, have thoughtfully reviewed each of the four proposals. The recommendations outlined in this report reflect a consensus of the TFER members.







# Process

The TFER approximately every two weeks from August through December. We evaluated issues like overall electoral processes and general best practices. We consulted outside experts, reviewed scholarly work on elections, and discussed the structures of fair and representative elections.

On Thursday, October 10, 2019, we held community meetings in the City's three wards to gain feedback from residents and stakeholders.

# Values

We established a set values to frame the discussion on each issue. The following fundamental values were key to the health and democratic nature of our electoral system:

**ACCOUNTABILITY:** The system must facilitate good governance and ensure that representatives' behavior is aligned with the interest of their constituents.

**FAIRNESS:** The system must produce elections that are equally accessible to all citizens, reduce barriers to entry and are impartial in process and administration.

**ENGAGEMENT:** Priority is given to the system that provides the greatest opportunity for citizens to become active and engaged in local issues.

**REPRESENTATION:** The system should maintain its democratic legitimacy while ensuring the inclusion of under-represented voices and perspectives.



# 4 Issues of Focus

## **8 SINGLE-MEMBER WARDS**

Changing the City Commission from its current form (two Commissioners representing each of three Wards) to an expanded Commission with eight single-member districts.

## **ODD VS EVEN YEAR ELECTIONS**

Moving elections to even-numbered years, concurrent with state and national elections. City elections currently take place in odd-numbered years, separate from major state and national elections.

## **FORCED GENERAL ELECTION**

Requiring general elections, regardless of whether a candidate receives the majority of votes during primary elections.

## **SPECIAL ELECTIONS VS APPOINTMENTS**

Requiring a special election to fill any vacancy on the City Commission.

## Recommendations

The TFER produced recommendations on the four issues we were charged with reviewing. It is our intention to be a resource to the City Commission and the residents of Grand Rapids as they ultimately determine the best means of electing representatives for our community.

Therefore, our conclusions incorporate arguments both for and against our recommendations. We also include a section with additional information on electoral issues that we feel deserve consideration when making future electoral reforms.

# Odd VS Even Year Elections

THE TFER RECOMMENDS THAT CITY ELECTIONS BE MOVED TO EVEN YEARS, IN COORDINATION WITH STATE AND NATIONAL ELECTIONS.

## Primary Reasons for Even-Year Elections:

- Significantly increase the democratic legitimacy of elections. The participation rate is 3 to 4 times higher than odd-year elections.
- More representative of the population, with minority communities better reflecting their proportion of the electorate.
- Improves efficiency of City election administration, resulting in fewer elections to administer and lower cost.

## Primary Reasons Against TFER Position:

- State and national issues may dominate the attention of electorate,
- Possible increased voter fatigue and a decline in participation toward the end of the ballot.

## 8 Single-Member Districts

The TFER does not believe the proposal for eight single-member wards is a better structure than the current system of three wards with two representative per ward.

The TFER does not recommend the proposal for eight single-member wards. We believe the current municipal electoral structure in the City can and should be improved to make it more inclusive and representative. Determining the precise formula for changing the system is beyond our charge.



## 8 Single-Member Districts (cont'd)

### Primary Reasons Against the 8-1 Proposal:

- Wards this small increase the risk of electoral “capture” by special interest groups.
- Multi-member districts increase racial / socioeconomic and viewpoint diversity of representatives.
- Alternate reforms would better achieve the benefits of smaller wards and more connected representatives.
- Multi-member districts encourage collaboration between representatives on issues impacting specific neighborhoods as well as City-wide issues.
- There will be a financial cost associated with adding this many new members to the City Commission.

### Primary Reasons Support the 8-1 Proposal:

- Larger Commission increases the connection between citizens and their representatives.
- Larger Commission would likely generate more deliberation and accountability on neighborhood issues.
- Grand Rapids is a growing city and its Commission should reflect that growth without diluting citizen representation.
- May increase the democratic nature of the City Commission by lowering barriers to entry for ethnic minorities and women as there would be more seats open to competition.

# Forced General Election

THE TFER RECOMMENDS ADOPTION OF THE PROPOSAL TO REQUIRE A GENERAL ELECTION.

Primary Reasons Supporting TFER Position:

- Voter turnout in primary elections is very low, making primaries less representative of the views of the general population.
- New information could come to light between the primary and general election to otherwise change public opinion on a candidate.
- Supporters of a primary candidate who didn't make it into the general would have another opportunity to exercise their vote.

Primary Reasons Against TFER Position:

- It costs the candidates more time and money for the extended campaign.
- It requires additional election administration.
- Voters may become frustrated by redundancy of multiple votes for overwhelmingly popular candidates.

# Special Elections vs. Appointments

THE TFER RECOMMENDS A SYSTEM WHERE:

- A special election is held if a vacancy occurs more than 1 year prior to the next general election, whereby the candidate should only be elected for the portion of the term left until the next general election, and,
- An appointment is made when an election is less than a year away, whereby the appointed person must run in the next general election to maintain the position on the commission.



## Special Elections vs Appointments (cont'd)

### Primary Reasons Supporting TFER Position:

- Elections represent the will of the people and this is fundamental to democratic legitimacy.
- An upcoming election is the best way to provide democratic legitimacy to fill a vacancy and the process should defer to higher turnout elections when possible.
- The longer the period until the next election, the more need for democratic processes to bestow legitimacy on a new City Commissioner.
- A shorter appointed term reduces the incumbent advantage should the appointed representative chose to run for the office.

### Primary Reasons Against TFER Position:

- Historically, special elections have extremely low turnouts, significantly degrading the democratic legitimacy of the election itself. They should be avoided if reasonable.
- Special elections require additional financial cost and impose an administrative burden on the Clerk's office.
- Existing members of the City Commission have democratic legitimacy and convey legitimacy on their appointments.
- A ward with a vacancy would be underrepresented for a longer period of time to accommodate an election.

## Special Elections vs Appointments (cont'd)

When an appointment to fill a vacancy is warranted, the process should be defined explicitly in City policy, and should include, at least the following attributes:

- A transparent, open and inclusive process.
- Material opportunity for residents to provide feedback and influence the outcome.
- Respect shown to popular opinion.
- Weighing whether an appointed candidate would run for re-election at the next opportunity. It is generally the view of the TFER that the City Commission should prioritize candidates who will only fulfill the remainder of the term and not run for reelection. The incumbency advantage should be minimized as much as possible when considering appointments.
- A formal process for evaluating how an appointment will reflect the racial/socioeconomic/viewpoint diversity of the ward in question.

# Additional Information:

The TFER reviewed several options and generally supports a Grand Rapids City Commission with the following characteristics: four wards with two commissioners representing each ward (a total of eight commissioners), ward elections alternated such that two wards elect commissioners in alternating elections, and all seats in the each ward should be elected on the same ballot.

Ranked Choice Voting for local elections would eliminate the need for the primary process. Ranked Choice voting has been shown to result in increased diversity of candidates and viewpoints represented, while making campaigns less contentious, and reducing the feeling of voicelessness among voters. The legality of Ranked Choice Voting under Michigan State law is currently disputed and therefore we cannot recommend it.

Multi-member districts typically provide benefits over single-member districts, including increased racial, socioeconomic, and viewpoint diversity among elected representatives.

In multi-member districts, having all the seats in each district run on the same ballot (versus staggering the elections within each district) tends to produce more diverse and representative outcomes than staggered elections for seats within a district.



## Conclusion

While we do not believe that the system is drastically broken, we do believe that election processes must continue to be evaluated and improved by the City of Grand Rapids. There are reform opportunities beyond the scope of our mandate that would improve the democratic nature of our elections and strengthen the City's relationship with the citizens.

We often found that the Grand Rapids City Charter does not adequately address the needs of the community. From its sexist language to its poorly defined election processes, we believe the Charter should be reformed to better meet our needs.

## Thank You

The TFER would like to thank, in particular, City of Grand Rapids staff who helped guide us in the process. We would also like to thank all the people who shared their views and made substantial contributions to the recommendations for electoral reform discussed in this report.





