

Task Force on Elected Representation Final Report and Findings

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 met nine times approximately every two weeks from August through December to discuss the four issues under consideration. Throughout this process we often evaluated related issues like overall electoral processes and general best practices. We consulted outside experts on specific issues, reviewed scholarly work on elections, and had substantive and robust discussions on structures of fair and representative elections.

Additionally, on Thursday, October 10, 2019, our members held community meetings in each of the City's three wards to gain feedback from residents and stakeholders. Despite the low attendance, these meetings provided dynamic and valuable discussion on issues important to Grand Rapids residents.

To help facilitate a structured discussion on election reform, we established a set of agreed upon values to frame our discussion on each issue at hand. We agreed that the following fundamental values were key to the health and democratic nature of our electoral system:

1. **ACCOUNTABILITY:** The system must facilitate good governance and ensure that representatives' behavior is aligned with the interest of their constituents.
2. **FAIRNESS:** The system must produce elections that are equally accessible to all citizens, reduce barriers to entry and are impartial in process and administration.
3. **ENGAGEMENT:** Priority is given to the system that provides the greatest opportunity for citizens to become active and engaged in local issues.
4. **REPRESENTATION:** The system should maintain its democratic legitimacy while ensuring the inclusion of under-represented voices and perspectives.

ISSUES FOR REVIEW

Below are the four issues the Task Force on Elected Representation reviewed as they apply to the City of Grand Rapids municipal elections.

Issue 1:

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.

Issue 2:

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

Issue 3:

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

Issue 4:

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

RECOMMENDATIONS

After careful deliberation guided by the values listed above, the Task Force on Elected Representation 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.

Below are the findings of the TFER:

Issue 1

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.

The Task Force on Elected Representation recommends that City elections be moved to even years, in coordination with state and national elections.

a. Primary Reasons Supporting Position:

- Even-year elections significantly increase the democratic legitimacy of elections. The participation rate in even-year elections is 3 to 4 times higher than in odd-year elections.
- Even-year elections are 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.

b. Primary Reasons Against TFER Position:

- As state and national issues will dominate the attention of electorate, consolidated elections may increase the cost and difficulty for local candidates to get their message to constituents.
- Evaluation of past even-year elections have indicated possible increased voter fatigue and a decline in participation toward the end of the ballot

Implementation of this recommendation can be decided by a vote of the City Commission and does not require a charter amendment/revision or a referendum. We believe the City should take this action.

Issue 2

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

The Task Force on Elected Representation does not believe the proposal for eight single-representative wards is a better structure than the current system of three wards with two representative per ward.

a. Primary Reasons Against the 8-1 Proposal:

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

b. Primary Reasons Support the 8-1 Proposal:

- Increasing the size of the GR City Commission will increase the connection between citizens and their representatives as wards would be smaller and the number of people represented by each Commissioner would be reduced.
- A larger City Commission would likely generate more deliberation and accountability on neighborhood issues.
- Grand Rapids is a growing city and its elected representatives should reflect that growth without diluting the representation of its citizens’ voice.
- 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.

The Task Force on Elected Representation does not recommend the proposal for eight single-member wards. Yet 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 the charge of our Task Force.

Issue 3

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

The Task Force on Elected Representation recommends adoption of the proposal to require a general election.

a. Primary Reasons Supporting TFER Position:

- Voter turnout in primary elections is historically a very small percentage of registered voters, making primaries less representative of the views of the general population.
- New information could come to light in the time between the primary and general election which would 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.

b. 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.

While we acknowledge that there are reasons to use primary elections to elect representatives when a candidate receives more than 50% of the primary vote, we believe a general election is a more representative democratic process.

Issue 4

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

The Task Force on Elected Representation recommends a system where (1) a special election is held if a vacancy occurs with 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 (2) 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.

a. 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 choose to run for the office.

b. 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.

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.

The TFER generally believes that the process for filling vacancies provided in Section 37 of the Grand Rapids City Charter has the right idea but amendments are needed. We agree that different situations may require different processes. Sometimes elections are warranted and other times appointments are the best option. We differ from Section 37, as we believe appointments are warranted when a vacancy is opened close to an upcoming election, but there should be a special election when there is a more than 1-year duration prior to the next election. Our essential position is that as the length of remaining term increases, it becomes more important for the seat to be filled pursuant to democratic elections.

ADDITIONAL INFORMATION

During our research and deliberations additional information and options outside the scope of work for the TFER were discussed and had significant support among our members. Our short mandate and lack of budget made it impossible for us to fully assess the wide range of electoral questions at hand and fully recommend an ideal system for Grand Raids. We share some additional findings, below, as a resource to the City Commission.

- a. 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.
- b. Ranked Choice Voting for local elections is a potential reform that was discussed by TFER. Adoption of Ranked Choice Voting 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.
- c. Multi-member districts typically provide benefits over single-member districts, including increased racial, socio-economic, and viewpoint diversity among elected representatives.
- d. 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

Issues of elected representation in Grand Rapids are extremely important. 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.

The underlying referendum proposals that spurred the creation of the TFER is evidence that citizens in Grand Rapids perceive a democracy deficit in our government. This sentiment rang loud and clear to our members in our various interactions with the public. We often heard of inaction by City Commissioners and the failure of Commissioners to respond to resident concerns in a timely manner. Residents often expressed deep distrust for the City Commissioners and their processes, showing a widespread belief that “the fix was in” on various policy decisions and that resident voices were not being reflected in decisions, including appointments to vacancies.

As we reviewed potential electoral reforms, we often found that the Grand Rapids City Charter did not adequately address the needs of the community. From its sexist language to its poorly defined election processes, we believe there is a need to reform the Charter to better meet our needs. While the TFER’s short mandate and lack of budget made it impossible for us to fully assess the wide range of questions before us, our findings should be understood by the City Commission with an eye to making the City more accountable, fair, and representative, while providing citizens more opportunity to have meaningful impact on policy decisions.

Regarding the specific issues we were tasked to review, we believe that (1) municipal elections should be conducted on even-years, (2) that the proposal for eight single-member districts should be rejected, but that reform to the structure of Wards and the timing of elections should be considered, (3) that primary elections should not decide the final outcomes of our electoral process, and that (4) there should be reform to the process of filling vacancies, but that a mixed system of appointments and elections should be implemented.

All of the above recommendations were made by consensus of members who attended meetings. Not all members were able to attend all meetings, but there was a high level of engagement overall and these recommendations reflect the will of the Task Force on Elected Representation as a whole.

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.