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Thoughts on districting from a newly district-elected councilmember

By Gina Latimerlo Apr 7, 2023



Districting is new for many of the cities here on the Peninsula. As someone who is both a fan of districting and one of the new crop of officials elected this way, I do have to say I'm sorry it happened as a result of lawsuits.

Because it was a consequence of legal action, I think many veteran city officials felt the move to districting was forced upon them. Something they didn't choose. And it's human nature to have difficulty accepting decisions that are forced on you — even if those decisions are, objectively speaking, decent ideas.

We often resist choices that are made for us, but not with us. We all want input on the decisions that affect our lives.

Having input is important to me. I filed to run for the City Council even before districting happened in my city. My area hadn't had any significant representation on the council in almost 40 years, and it was time to change that. Then, official districting came along, and, in fact, changed it. And, changed it for my community moving forward. That's a positive result.

In talking to many officials from many cities, however, there seems to be a recurring fear that a negative result of districting will be tribalism — the idea that a district-elected official will focus only on their particular area and find it hard to make choices that are good for the entire city. But wanting to contribute input and having a myopic focus are very different things.

District-elected folks want to be on City Council for the very same reasons that citywide-elected folks do. We want to do right by our community, by our neighbors and by our town. If I didn't care about the entire city, I would have just stayed on as president of my neighborhood association for another 10 years. But, I chose the City Council because it allows me to care for both my city and my neighborhood at the same time.

Members of City Council have two primary roles — roles which actually benefit from a districting system.

First, we're ambassadors. We get good ideas from residents and pass them into city governance, as well as take good ideas from city governance and make them accessible to residents.

I think it's easy to see why a resident might feel more comfortable talking to a councilmember who is their neighbor or someone from their school. A district councilmember is a very accessible city ambassador. Will that encourage new ideas and participation? Yes. Do we all benefit from that? Yes.

Secondly, councilmembers are decision makers. We vote on the strategies, priorities and projects that shape our city's future.

In doing so, we understand a city is an organism — and that it makes evolutionary sense for us to not only ensure that the whole organism survives and thrives, but that each part of it stays healthy. And, as any health nut will tell you, it's absolutely possible to do both. You don't have to sacrifice one for the other; if you do, you're doing both a disservice. It's all interconnected.

So the idea that, as a district-elected official, I have to either 1). do the thing that's right for my particular district or 2). do the thing that's right for my whole city is 3). a complete fallacy. It's the result of a zero-sum philosophy that is more harmful than beneficial.

Governing with an "and" philosophy is a better way forward. The thing that's right for the whole city can also be the thing that's right for the district. The thing that's right for the district can also be the thing that's right for the whole city. If some choice is truly detrimental to one or the other, then it's probably not the right choice. Better solutions exist ... and having a council with district representatives is a great way to get to the most well-rounded, win-win ideas. A great way to serve both our city whole and our district parts at the same time.

While we may not love how we got into this new system, I hope we can all see districting in a positive light. It's a chance for city councils to govern better by knowing more. It's a chance for each locality to be fully considered in citywide decisions (fortunately, in my city, that's been true for over a decade). Most importantly, though, it's a chance for residents in every area to have an actual voice in the choices that a city government makes.

And, remember, we all embrace choices more fully when those choices are made with us, instead of simply made for us.

Gina Latimerlo is a member of the Belmont City Council. This perspective is her own.