

Memorandum

To: Mayor, Vice Mayor, and City Commissioners, City of Battle Creek
From: Kate Flores, City Commissioner, Ward 3
Subject: Data relevant to City Charter discussions
Date: October 14, 2019

Background and Overview

This memorandum outlines data relevant to answering the question, “Does the current election system in Battle Creek promote broad representation?” The Blue Ribbon Advisory Committee (BRAC) was not directly charged with answering this question nor did it consider a full scope of data to adequately answer this question, beyond surveys of public opinion and comparison with other municipalities. Given the Committee’s recommendations and the discussion and concerns raised at the September 17th City Commission meeting, it felt pertinent to more thoroughly examine and consider this question.

Following that meeting, I requested and received assistance from the City Attorney, City Clerk, GIS Department, and City Manager’s office to gather information on the geographic, racial/ethnic, and gender trends in the City of Battle Creek over the last twenty years. I was provided raw data identifying names and addresses of at-large Commissioners and Mayors/Vice Mayors as well as current/former Ward maps. One key question I sought to answer was the impact at-large Commissioners have on the overall representation and power structure of the City Commission as a whole. I also sought to analyze how a proposed seven ward system may impact potential demographic representation on the Commission.

I performed the data compilation and analysis using Google Maps and Excel, and also reviewed maps of current voting turn-out trends by ward and demographic maps (race/ethnicity/income) for a proposed seven ward system compared to the current five ward system. Key data points and notes of my analysis of the maps are presented in this memorandum. I am happy to provide any of the raw data or maps at your request.

Please note this is not necessarily a complete analysis, nor a direct response to the question about the quality of representation in Battle Creek. This memorandum is intended to be informational as we consider potential amendments to the City Charter.

Current Battle Creek Demographics (for reference)¹

Total population – 51,247

Median household income: \$39,679

Race/Ethnicity:

66.8% white, non-Hispanic/Latino	2.8% Asian
18.7% black or African American	.8% American Indian and Alaskan Native
6.5% Hispanic/Latino	.1% Native Hawaiian and Other Pacific Islander
5.6% Two or More Races	

¹ Source – 2017 American Community Survey

Position of Mayor:

In last 20 years, there have been seven different Mayors: ²

- 80% are men, 20% women (*in the last 10 years, 40% have been women)
- 100% are white
- 71% live/lived south of Columbia Ave. in Wards 4 or 5; 29% from Wards 1 and 3. None from Ward 2.

Historically:

- 4 women in Battle Creek’s history have been Mayor, including Deb Owens (2014-15), Susan Baldwin (2009-13), Shirley McFee (1990-91), and Maude Bristol (1984-85).
- Maude Bristol is the only African American woman (or any woman of color) to be Mayor.
- There have only been **two African Americans** (or any people of color) selected as Mayor in the entire City history: Maude Bristol (1984-85) and Donald Sherrod (1979-81). In essence, it’s been **over thirty years** since Battle Creek has had a Mayor of color.

At-Large City Commissioners:

In the last 20 years (10 City Commissions):

- Of 40 elected at-large seats (4 at-large Commissioners over 10 Commissions), there have been 15 different individuals elected to at-large offices.³
 - Of the 15, two have been African American (13%). The rest have been white (87%).
 - Of the 40 elected seats, two (5%) have been African Americans. 95% have been white.
- Geographic break-down of the at-large seats per Ward⁴:

Ward	# of Seats	Percentage of total
Ward 1	0	0%
Ward 2	2	5%
Ward 3	8	20%
Ward 4	3	18%
Ward 5	26	59%

² These include: Mark Behnke, David Walters, Deb Owens, Susan Baldwin, John Godfrey, Brian Kirkham, and Ted Dearing

³ Please note: this only includes elected positions. It does not include vacancies that were filled by Commission appointment mid-term. The 15 elected Commissioners include: Mark Behnke, Dale Geminder, Becky Squires, Ted Dearing, Tyrone Baines, Nancy Macfarlane, Susan Baldwin, Franky Johnson, Ryan Hersha, Diane Thompson, Bill Morris, Andy Helmboldt, David Walters, Kaytee Faris, Sherry Sofia.

⁴ Please note – these have been reviewed with Ward maps from the relevant time periods.

- **Representatives from two Wards – 4 and 5 – have held a majority on the Commission (i.e. at least 5 of 9 total seats) 70% of the time.**
- The two most recent Commissions are among the 30% with a more even geographic distribution (1 person each from Wards 1 and 4, and 2 people each for Wards 2, 3, and 5).
- As far as we know, there have been 15 Commissioners of color (any seat, Ward or at-large) in the history of the Commission. The majority have been African American.

Voter Turn-Out

- In the last election (2017), the following represents the proportion of voters per Ward. Please note, this is not the turn-out rate per Ward (i.e. percentage of registered voters who voted). It is the percentage of actual voters in each Ward compared to the total number in the whole city who voted.

Ward 1	15%
Ward 2	10%
Ward 3	25%
Ward 4	24%
Ward 5	25%

- There is not easily available demographic data on Battle Creek voters, other than age and gender.⁵ However, when voter turn-out trends are overlaid with maps of income/race/ethnicity, it would suggest that there are more Battle Creek voters who are white and middle/upper income.

Proposed Seven Ward System:

Upon review of sample maps showing race and income demographic data per Ward, there do not appear to be significant differences from the current five ward system from a proportionality perspective. Roughly four wards would have higher rates of people with low/middle incomes and greater racial/ethnic diversity, while three would have higher rates of people with middle/high incomes and less ethnic/racial diversity. This is similar to the current system (three/two, respectively).

It is important to note that, while geographically smaller, Wards would still not correspond directly to neighborhoods and there could still be issues presented in the process of constructing such Wards. For example, as seen under one proposed model, mixing the Washington Heights area (with generally lower voter turn-out, 6-7%) with the historic Northside (generally higher voter turn-out, relatively, 19%) could result in decreased levels of representation for Washington Heights and the African American community generally.

It appears the greater impact from an equity/representation perspective from a proposed 7-2 system may be from the reduction of two at-large seats, reducing the currently high likelihood that representatives who live south of Columbia Avenue (generally more likely to be affluent and white) would have a majority number of seats on the Commission.

Please note, for the purposes of this memo, these are observations based upon review of election data, ward maps, and demographic maps, not conclusions or recommendations.

⁵ I was provided available data by the City Clerk for the last election, but did not have time to complete a gender/age analysis.

Questions & Caveats

- While I considered representation from geographic, racial/ethnic, and to some degree, income standpoints, there still is an underlying question that would require more discussion and analysis – what does “broad representation” mean?
- The question, “*Does the current election system in Battle Creek promote broad representation?*” is only one potential relevant question that could be considered when evaluating the quality of our election system. The City of Seattle, in a similar process in 2003, considered a broad range of questions, including:

Does the system promote broad representation?

Does the system promote accountability of Council members?

Does the system promote quality candidates?

Does the system promote quality government?

Does the system allow for addressing diverse issues?

Does the system lower election costs?

Does the system promote quality campaigning?

Does the system promote Councilmember responsiveness?

Does the system promote Councilmember accessibility?

Does the system promote the best checks and balances between executive and legislative power?

- I only looked back 20 years. Further analysis could be done, including asking to what extent has the current structure met the intended results when it was created several decades before. As far as I am aware, according to a former Commissioner at that time, when the current Commission structure was designed, this very same question about broadness of representation was considered and the current structure was intended to increase representation.
- I did not analyze the broader history of race/ethnicity, gender, or other demographics on the Commission as a whole body, or trends over time.
- Questions about representation and community engagement/participation in elections are complex subjects. The election system is an important component, but not the only possible or needed intervention to truly and comprehensively address these ideas.
- A significant, currently unknown factor on participation trends will be the change to even-year elections, which will be implemented for the first time in 2020.
- Ideally, this kind of data analysis would be performed by a committee or expert in the field.