

Clean up Providence ward mess

**SAM ZURIER
JOHN MARION**

Earlier this year, the City of Providence was required to redraw its ward boundaries in a process that was fraught with suspicion and controversy. Critics questioned both the standards upon which the committee and City Council based their decisions and the process for public hearings and votes on the proposed maps.

Working together, as a member of the City Council and the executive director of the government-reform organization Common Cause, we set out to propose a set of changes to the City Charter designed to make the process more transparent, accessible and objective in the future.

These changes will appear on the Nov. 6 ballot as Question 18 and we ask all Providence residents for their support.

There is no one solution to the problems that plague redistricting. The best we can hope to do is make the process transparent and accessible so that citizens feel their voices are heard, and make the standards more clear and complete so that those conducting the redistricting cannot use their discretion to serve their own self-interest. We drew off best practices in several municipalities, including the City of San Diego, in developing our proposed changes.

Transparency is a critical value whenever a government makes decisions in the name of its citizens. If decision-making is opaque, it leads to suspicion and undermines the legitimacy of government itself.

To make sure future redistricting in the City of Providence is transparent, the proposed charter changes require a minimum number of four meetings for public input and require more notice than the current Open Meetings Act requires.

One of the biggest problems with any decisions legislative bodies make are the last-minute changes that are difficult for the public to learn about in a timely manner. To prevent that from happening in redistricting efforts, these proposed changes require 72 hours between the initial and final votes on proposed ward boundaries and require a supermajority vote of any final alterations. Requiring greater consensus for potential changes means the rights of a significant minority would not be ignored.

Redistricting can be a technically complex

process, and simply shining a light on the process by making it more transparent is not sufficient to help prevent potential mischief. The City Charter currently provides limited guidance and restrictions on what the City Council can do when drawing new wards. Our proposed changes would help guide the Council to make districts that are more responsive to communities, not politicians.

The most dramatic change in our new standards prohibits the Council from considering the home address of incumbents or any potential political opponents when defining ward boundaries. While we cannot mandate good behavior on the part of incumbent politicians, putting these standards into the City Charter would provide a clear statement of what is and is not appropriate, and let an aggrieved party hold the City Council responsible in court.

Beyond trying to prevent incumbent protection through gerrymandering, we hope the proposed standards will also help any new wards better reflect the ever-changing face of Providence. We achieve this by providing a much more extensive definition of what is a "community of interest."

At the redistricting hearings this year, a common complaint was that proposed ward maps did not reflect what actual communities within the city look like. We hope this standard will better guide any effort to make districts reflect the many communities within Providence.

We understand these proposed changes cannot, by themselves, eliminate attempts to gerrymander, as these issues have arisen throughout our history, both locally and nationally.

With that said, we believe the proposed reforms to the City Charter would shine much more sunlight on the process, which in turn would empower citizens to monitor redistricting more closely and advocate for the public interest more successfully. And we have sought to give those citizens a series of tools, in the form of stricter standards, that any attempts to gerrymander can be measured against.

If you believe that as a citizen of Providence you can be better represented, please vote yes on Question 18, the last question on the ballot, on Nov. 6.

Sam Zurier represents Ward 2 on the Providence City Council. John Marion is executive director of Common Cause Rhode Island.