

Districts--a clash of plans

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Boston Globe (1960-); Jan 24, 1982; ProQuest Historical Newspapers: The Boston Globe

pg. 21

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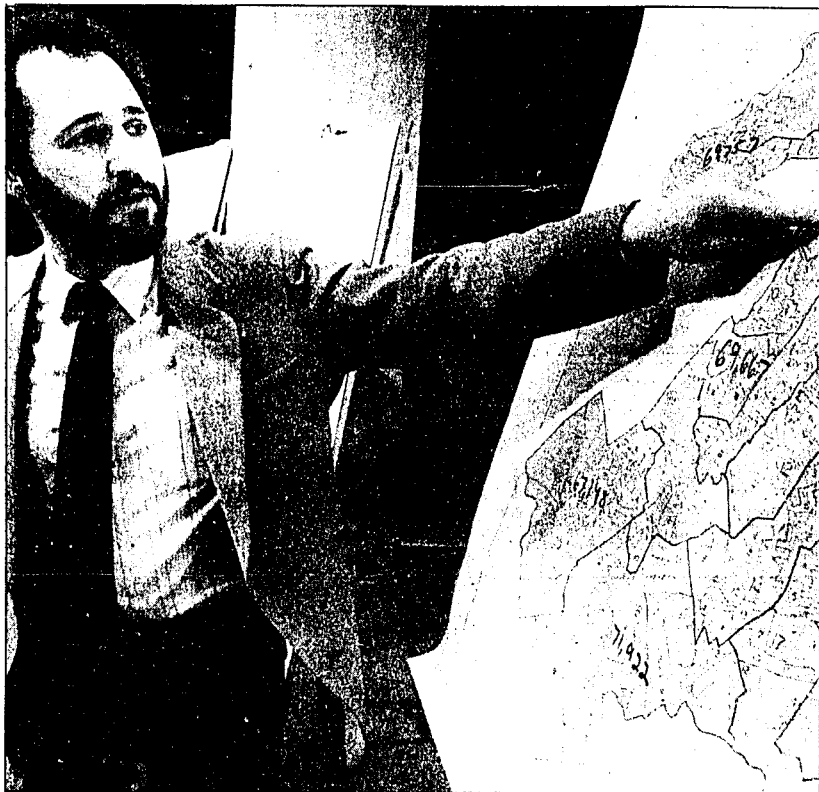
Citizens groups and aspiring politicians yesterday proposed plans for new voting districts in the city that were as different from each other as the snowflakes that piled up outside City Hall.

The proposals — offered in the first of two consecutive Saturday hearings before the Boston City Council — outlined specifically the racial, ethnic and political questions the council faces as a result of last fall's successful district representation referendum.

Brightly color-coded maps plastered on the concrete walls of the council chamber illustrated the problems that most political observers have been aware of — and most councilmen have been afraid of — since passage of the referendum.

Plans for two minority-dominated districts conflicted with plans for two Dorchester districts. Proposals for a Jamaica Plain-dominated district clashed with the idea that big-voter-turnout neighborhoods, such as Hyde Park and West Roxbury, should each dominate a district. The small, Irish neighborhood of Charlestown

DISTRICTS, Page 24



Mark Dreiser of Roslindale speaks at City Council meeting.

GLOBE PHOTO BY STAN GROSSFELD

Hearing produces a clash of plans for Hub districts

DISTRICTS

Continued from Page 21

didn't want to be districted with the big, Italian neighborhood of East Boston.

About 300 Bostonians tramped through heavy snow to hear around six hours of suggestions made to the councilmen, who must come up with a final plan by March 9 to avoid the involvement of Mayor Kevin H. White, or the courts, in the districting process. And numerous speakers said the plans they were backing had been decided on in smaller meetings of neighborhood groups or civic associations.

The indications of a high level of interest in the districting process suggested that the differences between neighborhood and ethnic groups would not be reconciled easily. So did the words of yesterday's speakers.

"Our priorities are greater representation for people of color . . . and for areas that have been underrepresented," said Patrick Walker, a leader of the Campaign for District Representation.

That organization was one of two major groups that pushed for abandonment of the current system, in which all members of the council and school committee are elected at large, in favor of the mixture of nine district and four at-large members each body will have starting next year as a result of the referendum.

"Where a (controversial) decision has to be made," Walker told the councilmen, "that decision should be made in favor of areas that have lacked representation in the past."

To Walker's group, that means districting Beacon Hill with South Boston, Chinatown with Mission Hill, West Roxbury with Hyde Park and Charlestown with East Boston.

To people in Charlestown, Robert Wallace of that Charlestown Town Council said, "that means we'd be dead politically."

"We're a political minority already," he said. "Our state senator is from Revere. Our other reps are from Chelsea and Cambridge." Wallace and some fellow "townies" proposed that they be districted with Beacon Hill, the Back Bay and other smaller neighborhoods so that no one neighborhood would dominate.

Representatives of some established Dorchester groups proposed districts for their section of the city that were incompatible with the citywide maps being pushed by organizations that campaigned for district representation.

Michael Traft of the Cedar Grove Civic Assn. told the councilmen: "We are very concerned by proposals from these groups which do not define Dorchester as a neighborhood but as 12 separate neighborhoods that can be broken up to suit the needs of other districts."

"Dorchester has more than enough residents to comprise two districts, and that is what should occur."

Arguing for creation of northern and southern Dorchester districts, Traft said: "We shouldn't draw districts that continue racial divisions. That's one of the problems this city has had."

However, Vivian Morris of Grove Hall countered that such a north-south division "would guarantee a tradition of white dominance in Dorchester. People of color in this city are unilaterally opposed to the north-south division."

Though the discussion sometimes seemed to go in circles, certain key issues emerged. The questions include:

- Should the Dorchester districts be divided by a north-south boundary, or one that runs east-west?

A north-south line would produce an eastern Dorchester district that would be very heavily white and a western Dorchester district that would be very heavily black. An east-west line would produce a southern district that would be predominantly white and a northern district that would be less predominantly black.

- Should Jamaica Plain be districted with West Roxbury, Mission Hill or Roslindale?

The West Roxbury pairing would allow Hyde Park and West Roxbury to dominate their districts. The Roslindale pairing would allow Jamaica Plain to dominate a district. The Mission Hill pairing also would allow Hyde Park and West Roxbury each to dominate a district, but would thwart some proposals of the Campaign for District Representation for the center-city area.

- Should Beacon Hill and Back Bay be districted together? To many, these are hardly separate neighborhoods, but rather subdivisions of one neighborhood. However, Walker made clear that the Campaign for District Representation is ready to divide them "because Beacon Hill could effectively moderate the vote in South Boston."

In contrast to the usual procedures by city councilmen, there were no opening or closing statements yesterday. "It's early yet," said veteran Councilman Frederick C. Langone when the hearing was over, "and there are a lot of loose ends. Too many loose ends."

Also contributing to this story was Contributing Reporter Judy Harrison.