

CHAMPAIGN COUNTY BOARD
PUBLIC HEARING MINUTES

PUBLIC HEARING OF THE CHAMPAIGN COUNTY BOARD

Tuesday, April 13, 2010

Lyle Shields Meeting Room, Brookens Administrative Center

1776 E. Washington St., Urbana

7:00 p.m.

MEMBERS PRESENT: Carol Ammons, Jan Anderson, Steve Beckett, Ron Bensyl, Thomas Betz, Lorraine Cowart, Chris Doenitz, Stan James, John Jay, Brad Jones, Greg Knott, Alan Kurtz, Ralph Langenheim, Brendan McGinty, Diane Michaels, Steve Moser, Alan Nudo, Steve O'Connor, Giraldo Rosales, Samuel Smucker, Barbara Wysocki

MEMBERS ABSENT: Lloyd Carter, Matthew Gladney, Michael Richards, Larry Sapp, Jonathan Schroeder, C. Pius Weibel

OTHERS PRESENT: Kat Bork (Administrative Secretary), Deb Busey (County Administrator), Amanda Tucker (HR Generalist)

CALL TO ORDER

Vice-Chair Betz called the meeting to order at 7:01 p.m.

ROLL CALL

Bork called the roll. Ammons, Anderson, Beckett, Bensyl, Betz, Cowart, Doenitz, James, Jay, Knott, Kurtz, Langenheim, McGinty, Rosales, Smucker, and Wysocki were present at the time of roll call, establishing the presence of a quorum.

READ NOTICE OF MEETING

Bork read the notice of meeting.

MOTION by Langenheim to approve the notice of meeting; seconded by Wysocki. **Motion carried with all ayes.**

Jones, Moser, and O'Connor entered the hearing at 7:03 p.m.

APPROVAL OF AGENDA

MOTION by Smucker to approve the agenda; seconded by James. **Motion carried with all ayes.**

Doenitz, Michaels, and Nudo entered the hearing at 7:04 p.m.

PRESENTATION OF ISSUE FOR PUBLIC COMMENT

Size of County Board & Multi-Member vs. Single-Member Districts

Betz described the substitute draft of the ordinance submitted by Beckett and stated that he hopes to see other proposals in coming months.

PUBLIC PARTICIPATION

Norman Stenzel advocated that county residents with little voice should gain or maintain representation in respect to county affairs. He stated the city dwellers have considerable influence in county activities through city governments, which rural residents lack. He spoke about the comprehensive zoning review hearings where some residents were disturbed by the lack of rural representation and how zoning was provided by those not in touch with rural concerns. Stenzel noted the Corridor 150 plan was heralded as example of intergovernmental cooperation. That plan's development included a modest attempt to gather residents' and landowners' opinions about the future of Corridor 150.

Eric Thorsland supported having 18 single-member County Board districts with a county-wide elected Board Chair. In response to the concerns about rural representation, he stressed that the County Board represents the entire county, not just a specific municipality. All County Board members represent rural Champaign County. Thorsland noted Kurtz's district does not contain a single farm, but he attends Farm Bureau meetings and champions causes for rural residents. He proposed halving the 9 districts for a total of 18 districts. The county-wide elected Chair would bring the total number to 19 County Board members. A smaller County Board would be more manageable. Thorsland noted the number of County Administrators had been cut in half and staff salaries have been reduced, so the County Board itself should also make budget cuts. He acknowledged the Chair has a difficult job that is treated as a part-time position. He supported changing the Chair to a full-time position, especially after eliminating one County Administrator.

Pattsi Petrie urged the County Board to consider historical information about how districts have been clustered over the years, leading to an inequitable distribution of representation throughout Champaign County. She wanted the Board to give serious consideration to single-member districts.

Patty Smith stated the County Board's current size is cumbersome and each district could be ably represented by one representative. She suggested making reducing the size of the County Board and implementing that change in 5 years time.

Jerry Watson addressed the Board representing the Farm Bureau. He believes the best structure is multi-member districts and opposes single-member districts for the reasons that they could limit diversity and centralize power. The large multi-member districts allow for better recruitment of qualified candidates to run for the County Board. He felt a structural change would eliminate current productive Board members because some members live close to one another and would be in the same district. He did not have a specific number in mind as the optimal size of the County Board. A small board could mean representation will not come from unincorporated areas where the County Board has a lot of impact.

James Schwartz supported multi-member districts since three members per district increases the likelihood that one will share his opinions. A smaller board gives a lot of power to fewer people. He stressed that the urban vote produced things no one in the rural areas wanted, like the county health district.

Weibel entered the public hearing at 7:22 p.m. Betz offered to turn the hearing over to Weibel and Weibel declined.

COUNTY BOARD MEMBER COMMENT

James realized most County Board members have connections to the inner cities and noted the differences between the needs and wants in rural versus urban areas. His mind was not made up yet, but he was concerned about the operations should members of a smaller Board miss meetings.

Beckett offered a substitute draft ordinance to reduce the size of the County Board from 27 to 18 members or 2 members per district. This would allow the County Board to reduce its size while still addressing concerns expressed with single-member districts. Districts will be in range of 22,000-23,000 if the census projections holds true. Beckett felt this proposal is a compromise and addresses the cumbersome nature of the County Board.

Jay was concerned why people thought the County Board was too large. The current size allows more diversity across the county and is more representative of the people. He did not think the Board should cut the number of members.

Ammons shared a story about a constituent from another district who approached Ammons because she felt her own County Board representatives do not represent her concerns as an urban person in a rural district. Ammons does not see the benefit of reducing a board's size. She noted the Will County Board reduced its size and did not think that change made a great difference regarding how politics are played in Will County.

Kurtz spoke about his enjoyment in the diversity of races, ages, and professions of the current County Board. Many urban Democrats have taken the responsibility to learn about rural areas in order to represent the entire county. Kurtz said he was approached by more constituents than just those within his district.

Michaels worried about representing several different townships or villages if the districts are redrawn according to population and how to encompass the diversity of that area.

Langenheim was not convinced the current Board structure was inadequate or inefficient. He wanted to have a constituency small enough for Board members to communicate with voters and run for office without spending a lot of money. Since that now exists, he saw no reason to make a change.

Nudo was pleased Beckett put forth a proposal with an actual number of Board members. If the number of districts was increased, then smaller districts could be drawn. He supported drawing a map with compact and contiguous districts as a way to better represent the people and avoid gerrymandering.

McGinty spoke about improving the County Board's efficiency and accountability. With an 18-member board, the rural percentage of representation would not change and minority representation could increase. Compromises have to be made on controversial issues and 18 districts with 2 members each is such a compromise. He appreciated those members who have submitted actual proposals. It's up to each Board member to decide how much effort they will put into carrying out their responsibilities, including meeting with constituents. He emphasized there would be more accountability with a smaller board.

Rosales was offended when people say he does not represent rural areas because he serves on the County Board and represents the entire county, same way President Obama represents the entire country and Senator Durbin represents the entire state. He spoke about the great aspects of Champaign County. But he thinks the County Board is broken and the long speeches its 27 members like to give are often posturing and politicking. This 27-member board has collectively made a lot of wrong decisions. Rosales defended the 18-member board proposal as a good solution. In regards to the distribution, he pointed out the districts are drawn according to population and the population concentration is in cities. The rural representatives have more townships, but have the same number of people (approximately 22,000) to represent as the urban representatives. Reducing the size would also reduce the cost of the County Board, which is admirable during a time when the County's employees are facing reductions. Rosales felt the proposal was a good place to start. He stated the current Board is excessively big and wastes time with redundancy and political maneuvering.

Anderson views herself as representing the entire county and noted she is contacted by people outside of her district because she is visible as a liaison to other boards. In her opinion, the multi-member districts allowed for more diversity. She noted when the Urbana School Board drew new districts there were no candidates in some districts and multiple qualified candidates in others.

Knott would like to drop the partisan labels and baggage that candidates have to take in order to run for the Board because the members are supposed to represent the whole county. People want representatives who understand rural issues, regardless of where the Board members live. He wished they could adopt a form of county government not based on partisan politics, though he would like the Republicans to regain a majority in November. A lot of what the public is tired of is the party posturing.

Smucker requested a list of the County Boards and their sizes from comparable counties be made available for the next meeting. He asked whether the Board's size could ever be increased once it was reduced. Busey said, according to state statute, the County Board size cannot be increased beyond its size as of a certain date in late 70's or early 80's. She would check on the statute language.

Moser spoke about his district and the diverse area it covers. He would rather see more districts to increase rural representation, such as having a greater number of districts with 2 representatives each. He noted any rural district also contain urban areas.

Smucker exited the public hearing at 7:56 p.m.

McGinty remarked many people from all over the county have told him they think the County Board should be smaller. The only voices he has heard say that the Board is fine or should be larger

come from this chamber. People have told him that having so many members makes watching County Board meetings tedious.

Smucker returned to the public hearing at 7:57 p.m.

Langenheim commented that, according to federal law, the only way to increase representation in the rural districts is to increase the population in the rural districts. He informed the rural members that they decrease their constituency every time they buy out their neighbor's farm.

Kurtz stated most constituents do not know nor do they care how many members are on the County Board. Most of the constituents are only aware of the County Board's decisions if it makes the local news and are otherwise unaware of what goes on in this chamber. He advised the members to proceed with caution in altering the Board's size before the redistricting occurs because they might not like the results of the reapportionment.

Jones would like to see a smaller, efficient government with compact and contiguous districts. He felt the County Board meetings are very inefficient and the last hour has been an example of a great deal of talking without accomplishing anything. There is a lot of posturing during Committee of the Whole meetings that last for 3 hours when the business should only take 1 hour. The current Board size is too cumbersome when eighteen members would be a sufficiently diverse group to represent the county. In response to the notion that some districts might lack a candidate, Jones stated he has never noticed a shortage of people wanting to run for the County Board. He would like to see term limits implemented to bring in new faces.

Smucker said the purpose of a public hearing was to not accomplish anything, instead to thoughtfully discuss the issues and consider the options.

Ammons was in favor of multi-member districts and would love to see term limits. It would be helpful to see what the districts would look like prior to voting on the Board's size. She wanted someone with mapping skills to put together sample maps. She was not against a reduction in size, but wanted more information about how the changes will look on a map. Nudo concurred that the County Board has the opportunity before the reapportionment commission is selected to debate different examples of how compact and contiguous districts should look. He felt the Farm Bureau understood the rural population will decrease from census to census by virtue of their farmland protection decree. The issue really is peer representation with compact and contiguous districts.

O'Connor suggested drawing a map by locating the radius point and dividing the county into pie-shaped sections.

Rosales said the size and dimension of districts could not be accurately determined without census data. Some districts may be wider because the population in a village like Rantoul has decreased. Wysocki recommended using the current census data and projections, for purposes of discussion, to create hypothetical districts that were compact and contiguous. It might help the people who need to visualize a map to select a shape and then divide the county according to population for discussion purposes. Rosales suggested dividing the county from the center like the spokes of a wheel.

Weibel exited the public hearing at 8:11 p.m.

COUNTY BOARD DISCUSSION REGARDING FUTURE ACTION

Betz expected Board members to come up with draft proposals in the form of a resolution or ordinance so the various proposals can be compared and contrasted.

Weibel returned to the public hearing at 8:12 p.m.

Beckett questioned the process's deadline. Betz noted this Board cannot bind the next Board on the question of size. The reapportionment cannot be done until they have census numbers. The Board could pass a resolution and hope the next Board abides by it. It could also be an advisory ballot proposition. Betz cautioned members that the map will be gerrymandered no matter what they do. He spoke about the population distribution in the county and how that does not result in perfectly square districts. Betz stated voters elect him to exercise his judgment, not to simply follow the majority, because he is better informed on county issues than they are. He remarked 75% of the county's population is located within four townships and that central fact cannot be overcome. He liked single-member districts with a total of 15-17 Board members. He wanted more proposals drafted based on the ideas mentioned tonight for the next meeting.

ADJOURNMENT

The public hearing was closed at 8:22 p.m.

Respectfully submitted,

Kat Bork
Administrative Assistant

Secy's note: The minutes reflect the order of the agenda and may not necessarily reflect the order of business conducted at the meeting.