

CITY OF CRANSTON
REDISTRICTING COMMISSION
Regular Meeting of June 24, 2021 – APPROVED MINUTES

The Cranston Redistricting Commission met on June 24, 2021, in a meeting advertised in accordance with the Rhode Island Open Meetings Act on June 18, 2021. The meeting was called to order by the Chairperson, Randall Jackvony, at 5 p.m. It was held virtually via electronic means on Zoom, conducted in accordance with the Governor's Executive Order 20-46 in response to the COVID-19 Coronavirus Pandemic.

MEMBERS PRESENT: Randall Jackvony, Gary Vierra, Quilcia Moronta

MEMBERS ABSENT: None

NON-MEMBERS PRESENT: Nicholas Lima (Registrar / Director of Elections), Maria Giarrusso (GIS Manager), Jason Pezzullo (Planning Director), Steven Frias (Charter Review Commission Chairperson)

The chair declared a quorum present.

AGENDA

- I. CALL TO ORDER (NO VOTES TO BE TAKEN)
- II. APPROVAL OF THE AGENDA (VOTES MAY BE TAKEN)
- III. APPROVAL OF MINUTES – 5-10-2021 (VOTES MAY BE TAKEN)
- IV. PUBLIC ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS – COMMISSION CHAIRPERSON (NO VOTES TO BE TAKEN)
- V. PUBLIC COMMENT (NO VOTES TO BE TAKEN)
- VI. OLD BUSINESS
 - A. THE COMMISSION MAY DISCUSS AND BE PROVIDED AN UPDATE FROM STAFF REGARDING STREET RANGE FILE AND DATA PREPARATION WORK COMPLETED TO DATE IN SUPPORT OF REDISTRICTING (NO VOTES TO BE TAKEN)
- VII. NEW BUSINESS
 - A. THE COMMISSION MAY HEAR FROM CHARTER REVIEW COMMISSION CHAIRPERSON STEVEN FRIAS AND DISCUSS THE NEW CHARTER PROVISION PERTAINING TO REDISTRICTING APPROVED BY CRANSTON VOTERS IN NOVEMBER 2020 (NO VOTES TO BE TAKEN)
 - B. THE COMMISSION MAY DISCUSS THE CONCEPTS OF NEIGHBORHOODS, SUB-NEIGHBORHOODS, AND COMMUNITIES OF INTEREST AS THEY RELATE TO REDISTRICTING, AND DETERMINE A DATE FOR A PUBLIC HEARING OR HEARINGS TO SOLICIT COMMUNITY INPUT (VOTES MAY BE TAKEN)
 - C. THE COMMISSION MAY BE PROVIDED AN UPDATE FROM STAFF ON THE STATUS OF REDISTRICTING LEGISLATION AT THE GENERAL ASSEMBLY (VOTES MAY BE TAKEN)

VIII. ADJOURNMENT (VOTE MAY BE TAKEN)

APPROVAL OF THE AGENDA

Mr. Jackvony asked for a motion to approve the agenda.

MOTION: By Mr. Vierra and seconded by Mr. Jackvony to approve the agenda as posted.

PASSED ROLL CALL VOTE – 3-0 – Mr. Jackvony, Mr. Vierra, and Ms. Moronta voting Aye.

APPROVAL OF MINUTES

Mr. Jackvony asked if the minutes had been distributed to the members. Mr. Lima said they were sent out shortly after the last meeting.

MOTION: By Mr. Jackvony and seconded by Mr. Vierra to approve the meeting minutes of 5-10-2021.

PASSED ROLL CALL VOTE – 3-0 – Mr. Jackvony, Mr. Vierra, and Ms. Moronta voting Aye.

PUBLIC ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Mr. Jackvony thanked Ms. Giarrusso, Mr. Pezzullo, and Mr. Frias for joining the Commission to discuss these items.

PUBLIC COMMENT

No members of the public appeared to speak.

OLD BUSINESS

A. THE COMMISSION MAY DISCUSS AND BE PROVIDED AN UPDATE FROM STAFF REGARDING STREET RANGE FILE AND DATA PREPARATION WORK COMPLETED TO DATE IN SUPPORT OF REDISTRICTING

Mr. Lima said this was carried over from the previous meeting in case members had any additional questions. He also said Ms. Giarrusso had some updates on what has transpired since the Commission met last.

Ms. Giarrusso said a lot of time has been spent reviewing voter addresses that don't match up with geocoded E-911 site addresses. Some mismatches may be due to incorrect addresses in the Central Voter Registration System, while others may be indicative of inaccurate or out-of-date data in the E-911 system. Some examples could be multifamily houses, where the CVRS has multiple addresses listed for a structure, but E-911 wasn't aware of the secondary addresses associated with it. She said this is a good opportunity to clean up address data across the board.

One major task for redistricting is to ensure each registered voter is coded to an address that puts them in the correct census block. That way, when the new CVRS street range file is generated, it will result in voters being assigned to the correct precinct. She said this is just one example of important, quality control-type work that has to take place as we prepare for redistricting.

Mr. Jackvony asked what the source of the E-911 data was. Ms. Giarrusso said there are state-level datasets that are used that geocode site addresses to buildings.

Mr. Lima said this will also help the Board of Canvassers because some of the houses that have been identified as missing E-911 site addresses may be valid ranges in the system but actually represent a structure that was knocked down, converted, or no longer occupied for residential purposes. This makes them and their associated street ranges prime candidates for removal from the system, to ensure no voters can be inadvertently registered there due to errors. He said cancelled records at addresses that no longer physically exist will be moved to City Hall so that the invalid street range can be eliminated.

Mr. Lima said some of the voters identified appear to be at commercial addresses, which may result in additional work for the Board of Canvassers to review those voters to see if they are legitimately registered to vote. He said this process is allowing us to look at the city's address data from new angles and perspectives, which will help to maintain clean voter rolls by identifying issues that were not readily apparent before.

NEW BUSINESS

A. THE COMMISSION MAY HEAR FROM CHARTER REVIEW COMMISSION CHAIRPERSON STEVEN FRIAS AND DISCUSS THE NEW CHARTER PROVISION PERTAINING TO REDISTRICTING APPROVED BY CRANSTON VOTERS IN NOVEMBER 2020

Mr. Jackvony said Mr. Frias was the chairperson of the Charter Review Commission in 2019 and 2020, and was the author of the new redistricting charter amendment approved by the Commission and enacted by voters in November 2020. He asked Mr. Frias to explain the background and rationale of the new charter provision.

Mr. Frias thanked the Commission for the opportunity to speak on this matter. He said that in previous redistricting cycles, it was noted that major roads and natural features such as rivers were not always used to draw district lines, and instead small side streets or other less preferable geographies were used that had the effect of breaking up neighborhoods. Mr. Frias said that John Marion, from Common Cause Rhode Island, made public comments to the Charter Review Commission suggesting new language to improve future redistricting processes.

Mr. Frias said the goal of the new language is to reduce gerrymandering and political self-interest in the process, by providing clearer guidelines with which to follow. He said Mr. Marion came up with several of the proposals incorporated into the new language, which Mr. Frias drafted and submitted to the Charter Review Commission for approval. He said language from other local and state laws was used in drafting the amendment.

He said the compactness and contiguous language is retained from the old charter, as well as the phrase requiring a near-equal number of inhabitants in each ward, which is satisfied by a plus-or-minus five percent population variation. Mr. Frias said the requirement that the geographic integrity of local neighborhoods and communities of interest is new, as is the requirement that districts be bounded by major roads and natural features – each to the extent possible, because at times there may need to be a balance between these competing goals.

Mr. Frias said the definition of neighborhoods can be subjective. As for communities of interest, he said the definition can vary, such as common economic interests, or interests in a local school that is commonly attended by residents of an area. He cautioned against drawing lines based on racial, ethnic, or religious communities due to the constitutional issues raised by intentionally separating these populations.

Mr. Frias defined major roads as exemplifying I-295 or Reservoir Ave., and noted that while their use as boundaries is highly encouraged, not all major roads or natural features may need to serve as ward boundaries themselves. He also pointed out the new language that discourages politicization of the redistricting process, including the prohibition of drawing lines with the intent of harming or favoring a political candidate, office holder, or party. He said the addresses of office holders and candidates cannot be a consideration.

For the most part, Mr. Frias said the current ward lines comply with the new charter provision, although there are some exceptions that could be corrected, such as a portion of Ward 4 that is isolated east of I-295 that connects, geographically, to Ward 5. He said the biggest problem in the 2012 map is the jagged boundary line between Wards 2 and 3, which breaks up several neighborhoods and is inconsistent with the new charter language.

Mr. Frias said it's important to show work-in-progress maps to the General Assembly's state Redistricting Commission so that it can be incorporated into their plans, and avoid the creation of pocket precincts where state and city boundaries don't line up. He said Precincts 0720 and 0714 are current examples where state boundaries went beyond the city's 2012 ward boundaries to create small pockets of voters.

Mr. Vierra said there has been a tremendous amount of growth and development in Ward 4, and he would expect to see Ward 4 shrink in area and the other wards to increase. Mr. Frias said that's a possibility, however he noted that in 2012, Ward 4 was about 400 inhabitants short of the city-wide average, so it would first need to make up that difference. Mr. Frias added that the I-295 Ward 4/Ward 5 boundary discrepancy, if corrected, could make up several hundred more voters, eliminating the need for much more change than that.

Mr. Vierra asked whether we're looking at total population, or just voters. Mr. Frias said it is total population – so if Cranston has 80,000 people, that number divided by six is the average ward population figure, regardless of the total number of registered voters. Mr. Vierra asked if the population continues to grow whether another ward would be needed. Mr. Frias said that would require a charter change, and therefore would not be under consideration now.

Mr. Vierra asked what the priority should be when reviewing boundary adjustments. Mr. Frias said that the charter's language puts each factor at equal importance, which requires a balancing in terms of prioritization. He said that, personally, he believes the major roads and natural features in Cranston tend to line up with many established neighborhoods and communities of interest already, so following them as boundaries can be helpful. Mr. Frias said that ultimately, it's a judgement call and balancing act, and there's no simplistic answer.

Mr. Vierra said it's up to the Commission to make a recommendation to the City Council, and that the Council can always alter the lines beyond the Commission's recommendation. Mr. Frias agreed, and said that the process runs through the Ordinance Committee and full Council, and is ultimately subject to mayoral veto. The Council can accept, reject, or modify the Commission's recommendations.

Mr. Jackvony asked how timing will work with the General Assembly due to the overlap between the state and local processes. Mr. Frias said the data will be coming out in August, and simultaneously the state will be meeting and holding hearings, so it may be necessary to move quickly so that the city can provide input to that process before it becomes too far advanced. In the past, Mr. Frias said the Board of Canvassers waited for the General Assembly to complete its redistricting process, and then began its own. He said the result was some of the pocket precincts that emerged in the 2012 map.

Mr. Frias said there's no guarantee the state's Redistricting Commission will listen to recommendations from the city, but if there's an interest in avoiding the creation of pocket precincts, it's important to work quickly and try to present something to them. Mr. Lima said he spoke with Kimball Brace, the head of Election Data Services, which contracts with the state for redistricting, and he said that Mr. Brace was in-tune with the current state process and would be very open to collaborating with cities and towns to achieve parity between state and local districts. Mr. Lima said it is important to work with the state however we can and get whatever work can be done now, rather than waiting until February and being reactive.

Mr. Lima said that at a staff level, and at a more formal level through hearings, there will be a lot of communication between the city and state to ensure the state at least takes the city's concerns under advisement. He said that communication may result in state legislative lines that we can better work with as we simultaneously draw and finalize ward and precinct boundary lines.

B. THE COMMISSION MAY DISCUSS THE CONCEPTS OF NEIGHBORHOODS, SUB-NEIGHBORHOODS, AND COMMUNITIES OF INTEREST AS THEY RELATE TO REDISTRICTING, AND DETERMINE A DATE FOR A PUBLIC HEARING OR HEARINGS TO SOLICIT COMMUNITY INPUT

Mr. Jackvony and Mr. Vierra said it's a little early in the process to fully define these. Ms. Giarrusso presented her work to date and said it's important to complete this work as soon as possible so we can be in a position to present something of value at the state level. She said the work has already started, and it dovetails off of what Mr. Frias was talking about.

Ms. Giarrusso gave a brief PowerPoint presentation illustrating the process and challenges of defining neighborhoods. She said there is no official city neighborhood map, and that what we do have to work with is from 1983, when Western Cranston was mostly undeveloped. However, using that map as a base, she has been able to incorporate it into GIS so it can be easily viewed and updated.

She said it's important to have consistency and a singular voice in terms of what neighborhoods are. She worked with the Planning Department about 12 years ago to update the 1983 map slightly so that it could be incorporated into GIS, but it remains unofficial. This visualization of neighborhood data is a starting point for complying with the new charter language under discussion.

Ms. Giarrusso said because some of the neighborhoods defined on the old map are quite large, it doesn't serve our purposes well without breaking them into smaller pieces, or sub-neighborhoods. Using census block geographies, Ms. Giarrusso said there's a variety of ways to create sub-neighborhoods using preferred census block lines, which then avoids splitting up smaller neighborhoods by discouraging use of block lines that are problematic, such as power lines that go over houses.

Ms. Giarrusso said this is just for redistricting purposes, so the names of sub-neighborhoods aren't important – just the groupings of census blocks that we prefer to keep together. It's critical because, left unsaid, these decisions could be made by the state when drawing their lines, and the state does not have the same interest or knowledge in preserving the integrity of local neighborhoods and avoiding pocket precincts that we have at the city level.

The goal is to get agreement on what the groupings of neighborhoods and sub-neighborhoods should be, so that going forward this can be an authoritative source to help guide the redistricting process in compliance with the new charter language. Ms. Giarrusso said soliciting input from local officials and the public is the first step towards generating a dataset that can be published and usable.

Mr. Jackvony asked if there's been any feedback so far from the City Council or School Committee. Mr. Lima said most of the ward Council and School Committee members have come in briefly to look at the old neighborhood map and provide feedback. He said he's used that opportunity to explain the full redistricting process more clearly to the councilmembers, since it will ultimately land in their court and they should start to get a familiarity with the issues under consideration now. In terms of actual feedback, Mr. Lima said the interest has been in bigger neighborhoods, and there's not a lot of comment at all on sub-neighborhoods.

Mr. Lima said that, for our purposes, he equates the size of most neighborhoods to census tracts, and sub-neighborhoods to census block groups, except the actual geographic definitions and purposes are different. He said the census blocks are always available, however the best units we have to work with are sub-neighborhoods, comprised of several blocks, because they can be moved between wards and precincts with minimal impact on the people who reside there.

He said when he talked to Mr. Brace, the state was inclined to hit the ground running with public hearings this summer, so it's important we are prepared to provide them feedback soon if it's going to be put to good use.

Mr. Jackvony asked if we can do that without census data. Ms. Giarrusso said that because we do have the 2020 Census block boundaries, regardless of how many people are in the individual blocks, we do have the ability now to define neighborhoods because we have those geometries already.

Mr. Vierra asked if there's a lot of feedback at public hearings, and Mr. Lima said there is not typically a lot of participation. Mr. Lima said we do have a budget starting July 1, which includes funding to advertise public hearings in the Cranston Herald in order to solicit public participation and ensure people are aware of the process.

Mr. Lima said Governor McKee re-signed the executive order earlier this afternoon requiring continued virtual meetings through July 23, which means an in-person public hearing to review maps would also have to be broadcast live via Zoom using a hybrid model, which is technically challenging. He said the executive order makes having this type of in-person workshop for the Commission and public to look at maps and provide feedback more difficult to do from a technical standpoint, although it is possible.

Mr. Jackvony asked how we should meet going forward. Mr. Lima said that given the hands-on nature of reviewing various types of maps, Zoom is not the best option and we should attempt to have a public hearing with a hybrid component. Mr. Lima said we don't need to make this decision now, as he can work on this issue next week, however we should figure out now when it would make sense to hold the hearing. Mr. Lima said it's important that the public be involved, so there's a broader understanding of how much work and thought is being put into this process, with community feedback incorporated throughout.

Ms. Giarrusso said that once the initial work is done, being able to publish it on an online web map will allow the public to review it ahead of a public hearing. It's a matter now of getting that draft work complete and publicizing it.

Mr. Jackvony asked about the timing for the hearing, as the mid-July date Mr. Lima had suggested is very soon. Mr. Lima said it could be later in July or early August, as the executive order may or may not be extended beyond July 23. He said the House budget has an incorporated extension allowing the Governor authority to extend that order through Sept. 1. He said the General Assembly also has open meetings legislation pending, which could change the dynamic of what we are permitted to do if it passes next week. To ensure staff has enough time to prepare and publicize draft materials for the public to look at, and for it to be advertised in the Herald, Mr. Lima suggested the week of July 26 or early August would be the best route to take.

Mr. Jackvony said it's a tough time of year with vacations, so he asked Mr. Lima to reach out to the members afterwards to determine a good date and time. Mr. Jackvony asked if it would make more sense to hold a hearing later in August, however Mr. Lima said that if we miss our window with the state's Redistricting Commission, once census

data is released on Aug. 16 our priorities will change and this part of the process will fall out of focus. He said wrapping up the neighborhood process before then is important.

Mr. Jackvony said he liked Ms. Giarrusso's idea of ensuring materials are online well in advance for the public to review, ideally for a few weeks ahead of a public hearing.

Ms. Moronta asked if the new redistricting process can use the old census data to start, and then be adjusted to align with the new data later. Mr. Lima said there's not much use in utilizing the old data now, aside from perhaps doing a mock redistricting to better understand the workflow of the process. However, he said right now we're not really looking at population data at all, because in a few weeks we'll have fresh data out of the gate and be able to hit the ground running working with it.

Mr. Lima said there is a lawsuit pending in Alabama, joined by several other states, because the U.S. Census Bureau is using a controversial new method called differential privacy to adjust census block population counts. He said early reviews of the methodology have produced startling results in some cases where blocks that are known to have no inhabitants suddenly are reported as having a population, and other blocks increase or decrease drastically. Mr. Lima said many states are concerned about the accuracy of that data for redistricting purposes, although the intent is to protect individual privacy of census respondents. He said at the lowest block levels, the data variance can be significant, and he expects this issue to come up at a national level as we go forward.

Ms. Moronta asked how this has changed from the past, and Mr. Lima said the Census Bureau is adjusting its privacy methodology because of advancements in computing technology that allow individual census respondents to potentially be unmasked, unless statistical noise is injected into the data. He said the academic question is whether the Census Bureau changed things too much, and made the data less usable for our purposes and those of jurisdictions across the country.

Mr. Frias asked Mr. Jackvony if he could offer a comment, which was granted. Mr. Frias emphasized the importance of looking at major roads and natural features when reviewing ward boundaries, as that can simplify some of the process. He cautioned getting bogged down into sub-neighborhoods west of I-295, because it's all likely to be in one ward, and while neighborhood boundaries are useful, natural features and major roads are still an option permitted by the charter.

Ms. Giarrusso said the sub-neighborhoods are not hard boundaries, but it's more useful at the state level to help avoid pocket precincts. She said if we don't provide them with that data, then it won't be considered at all. She said it's more of a guide, and not a hard and fast rule. Ms. Giarrusso noted that the Census Bureau now allows some parcel lines to be census block boundaries, which is more helpful in keeping some neighborhoods intact than traditional road centerlines, depending on the area.

Mr. Lima said it's important to figure out sub-neighborhoods because we have a concurrent responsibility – the Redistricting Commission has to recommend ward boundaries, but at the same time, the Board of Canvassers has to set precinct lines, which do cross through wards and are heavily dependent on state legislative lines. He

said that ward lines, in a vacuum, are pretty easy to draw, because for the most part there are existing major roadways and natural features to use. He said the difficult part becomes precincting, where it's more important to provide guidance to the state on sub-neighborhoods and ensure we're not set up for failure in the creation of pocket precincts.

Mr. Jackvony said it's important we get feedback to the state, but we likewise have to be careful not to over-engineer. He agreed that natural boundaries and major roads often have a tendency to separate neighborhoods anyway. He also said it's important to keep precincting in mind as that will be challenging when the time comes.

C. THE COMMISSION MAY BE PROVIDED AN UPDATE FROM STAFF ON THE STATUS OF REDISTRICTING LEGISLATION AT THE GENERAL ASSEMBLY

Mr. Lima stated, on a related legislative note, that the state Senate passed the three election administration reform bills submitted by request of the Cranston Board of Canvassers at the same time we've been meeting here, although the bills have not yet moved out of committee in the House.

Mr. Lima said the state's redistricting legislation unfortunately still only mandates a minimum precinct size of 100 voters, whereas state election law is 500. Ideally, precincts should not have fewer than 1,000 voters. He said much of the law under consideration by the General Assembly is similar to the 2011 redistricting legislation, including using a plus-or-minus five percent variable for state legislative districts, and some of the same language Cranston has in the Charter. Mr. Lima said the bill was introduced in April, amended in committee in early June, and passed the full House on June 15. It was approved by Senate Judiciary June 21, and is now pending a floor vote.

ADJOURNMENT

MOTION: By Mr. Vierra and seconded by Mr. Jackvony to adjourn.
PASSED UNANIMOUSLY – VOICE VOTE

The meeting was adjourned at 6:12 p.m.

Respectfully Submitted,

Nicholas J. Lima
Registrar / Director of Elections
Recording Secretary to the Redistricting Commission

APPROVED by the Cranston Redistricting Commission: August 10, 2021