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**At-Large Seats for the EBR Parish Metropolitan Council:**  
An Opportunity for Improved Representation



Baton Rouge Area Chamber

The structure of a government and the policies that government produces are intrinsically linked. As such, it is important for citizens to occasionally review how their government is structured and to make improvements where opportunities exist. This issue brief discusses one potential improvement to the East Baton Rouge (EBR) City-Parish Government: the creation of “at-large” seats on the Metropolitan Council. Councilman Pat Culbertson has recently floated such a proposal, which calls for revamping the current system of twelve “local” districts (called “wards” in other parts of the United States) and creating a new arrangement with ten local districts and two at-large districts. The proposal stipulates that the two at-large council members would be elected by plurality vote in a cumulative-voting, multi-member district, meaning that all at-large candidates run together and the two candidates with the most votes get elected to the at-large seats. Under cumulative voting arrangements, voters would cast two votes in the at-large election and could give both votes to a single candidate or split them among two candidates. Culbertson’s proposal would also make the at-large candidate with the most votes President Pro Tempore of the Metro Council. Candidates for the ten local districts would still run in single-member districts as they do today.

This proposal may be taken up by the Metro Council during their regular meeting on June 28. If approved by a majority of Council members, the proposal would be considered by EBR Parish voters in the election on September 30, 2006. If approved by the voters, these proposed changes would become effective for Council members assuming office on January 1, 2009.

In this issue brief, the Baton Rouge Area Chamber (BRAC) evaluates the effectiveness of at-large districts by considering their benefits and limitations, with specific attention to the changes offered by the current proposal. In studying such electoral systems, we review the structure and impact of at-large districts in 21 other municipalities around the United States. Furthermore, we review published research on at-large seats in general and on cumulative voting in particular. We conclude that at-large seats, if structured as multi-member districts with cumulative voting arrangements, offer an opportunity for improved representation of the parish’s general interest and increased fiscal responsibility while protecting minority representation.

### **A Review of At-Large Districts in Other Cities**

The most common electoral system used by city councils in the United States is the one currently used to elect members of the EBR Metro Council: local, single-member election districts. While this simple system is most common, a great variety of other electoral systems have been adopted by city councils, including several which incorporate at-large districts. A BRAC review of city councils with at-large districts indicates further variation in the overall design of these electoral systems and their voting rules (see table).

### Electoral Systems of Selected City Councils with At-Large Districts

City	State	Number of Local Districts	Number of At-Large Districts	Electoral Design of At-Large Districts
Arlington	Texas	5	3	Single-member
Atlanta	Georgia	12	4	Single-member
Chesapeake	Virginia	0	8	Multi-member
Colorado Springs	Colorado	4	4	Single-member
Columbia	South Carolina	4	2	Single-member
Corpus Christi	Texas	5	3	Multi-member (cumulative voting)
Durham	North Carolina	0	6	Single-member (residency requirement in 3 districts)
Fremont	California	0	4	Multi-member
Kansas City	Missouri	6	6	Single-member
Little Rock	Arkansas	7	3	Single-member
Nashville	Tennessee	35	5	Multi-member (cumulative voting)
New Orleans	Louisiana	5	2	Single-member
Oakland	California	7	1	Single-member
Portland	Oregon	0	4	Single-member
Raleigh	North Carolina	5	2	Multi-member
Santa Ana	California	0	6	Single-member (residency requirement in all 6 districts)
Savannah	Georgia	6	2	Single-member
St. Louis	Missouri	28	1	Single-member
Tampa	Florida	4	3	Single-member
Toledo	Ohio	6	6	Multi-member
Virginia Beach	Virginia	0	10	Single-member (residency requirement in 7 districts)

As these selected examples show, most city councils with at-large districts are designed in combination with local districts, as only a few councils employ at-large districts exclusively. Furthermore, at-large districts can be designed as either “single-member” or “multi-member” election districts. As a matter of definition, single-member election districts are used to determine single winners in a given election, while multi-member districts elect more than one representative from a given slate of candidates. For example, the city council in New Orleans has two distinct at-large seats that are elected separately (i.e., single-member election districts). On the other hand, the city council in Nashville has five at-large seats which are won by the top five vote-getters in a single election (i.e., multi-member election district).

A simple matrix, using mostly familiar examples, shows how districts can be designated as either single-member or multi-member on one dimension and as either local or at-large on the other dimension:

**Matrix of Electoral Systems (and Selected Examples)**

	Single-Member	Multi-Member
Local District	EBR Metropolitan Council	N/A
At-Large District	New Orleans City Council	Nashville City Council

Considered within this framework, the differences among electoral systems used by city councils can be understood more readily. In the BRAC review of 21 councils with at-large districts, 15 used single-member election districts to determine their at-large representatives and the other 6 used multi-member election districts. Two councils reviewed by BRAC (Corpus Christi and Nashville) employ cumulative voting arrangements in multi-member election districts to determine their at-large representatives. In these cumulative voting systems, voters get one vote per seat and can distribute their votes among candidates in any combination, including the option to cast all votes for a single candidate. Three other councils reviewed by BRAC (Durham, Santa Ana, and Virginia Beach) use residency requirements to ensure geographic diversity among officials in their single-member, at-large districts, meaning that individuals must reside in a certain part of the city in order to qualify as candidates for a given at-large seat but voters throughout the entire city get to vote in the at-large election.

**Benefits of At-Large Seats**

Given the diversity of electoral arrangements used to elect city council members, the particular effects of at-large seats differ from place to place. Nevertheless, both casual observers and political scientists generally note two potential benefits of at-large seats:

*Wider Perspective*

In BRAC interviews with several city councils that have at-large seats, officials expressed a general sense that at-large representatives take a broader view of the issues facing their cities. Some officials believed that at-large council members behaved in a more objective fashion since they had the interests of the whole city in mind, rather than just a particular part of the city. Furthermore, the interviews also suggested that the perspective of at-large members facilitates a stronger connection between citizens and their representatives. As one official explained: “When you have at-large members, any citizen feels like they can call them up and complain. That gives them an additional outlet besides their district representative.” In short, the presence of at-large seats supports a wider perspective in council affairs, with the added benefit of greater objectivity and accessibility of individuals in public service.

### *Increased Fiscal Responsibility*

In councils comprised entirely of members elected by local districts, council members may have a tendency to support projects for other districts as long as projects benefiting their own district garner support in return. This phenomenon is known as “log-rolling,” and has been extensively documented in studies of the U.S. Congress. Councils with at-large representatives, on the other hand, have a greater tendency to focus on the fiscal health of the jurisdiction as a whole since there are fewer incentives to steer projects to particular areas. As such, the balance of evidence shows that systems with at-large districts can have significantly lower spending, debt, and taxes than systems comprised entirely of local districts.

### **Impact of At-Large Seats on Minority Representation**

Historically, the most widely cited concern with at-large districts is their tendency to under-represent minority groups. Indeed, if at-large districts are poorly designed, such systems may very well produce inequities in minority representation. The historical record against at-large seats is based on cases where at-large representatives were selected via single-member districts, which tend to be much less equitable in terms of minority representation. Indeed, even in theoretical terms, single-member at-large seats would favor the majority. For example, consider an area that is 70% white and 30% black. If the area were evenly divided among ten single-member local districts, purely racial voting would tend to produce approximately seven white council members and three black council members (in the absence of racial gerrymandering). Alternatively, a system of *single-member* at-large districts would likely deliver all ten seats to white candidates (assuming purely racial voting), thereby disenfranchising minority voters. Indeed, such at-large districts were once deliberately used as instruments for depressing black representation, which still fuels deep concerns about their consequences. Such concerns about at-large districts motivated the wide-spread adoption of single-member local districts like those currently used in EBR Parish.

On the other hand, at-large districts associated with well-designed electoral systems (i.e., employing cumulative voting in multi-member districts) appear to encourage racial equity to the same degree as single-member local districts. Given that at-large seats, under the right circumstances, can achieve similar levels of minority representation, they should be evaluated with careful attention to their particular design features. In designing at-large districts that protect minority representation, cumulative voting arrangements appear particularly compelling, as explained below.

### **Focus on Cumulative Voting**

In addition to the two city councils with cumulative voting reviewed by BRAC above, more than 50 jurisdictions in Texas adopted cumulative voting in the 1990s and nearly two dozen Alabama localities did the same in the wake of a

sweeping win in a voting rights case. According to studies of the Alabama cases, “these [cumulative voting] elections demonstrate that they have boosted turnout and increased black representation as much as or more than would have occurred if single-member districts had been used.” As these trends suggest, cumulative voting, which is included as a provision of Dr. Culbertson’s proposal, is increasingly being used to enhance minority voting strength relative to traditional electoral systems, including single-member local districts.

Given the balance of evidence favoring cumulative voting in both theory and practice, the U.S. Department of Justice (DOJ) has pre-cleared use of cumulative voting in numerous states subject to Section Five of the Voting Rights Act. As of 2000, every jurisdiction seeking to convert from single-member election districts to multi-member districts with cumulative voting arrangements was ultimately permitted to do so. Furthermore, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) and other minority rights groups have supported plaintiffs pressing for cumulative voting in multi-member districts, including those in Amarillo, Texas, the largest city now using cumulative voting.

### **Limitations of At-Large Seats**

While less significant than the risk of under-representing minority groups due to poorly-designed electoral rules, there may be a few additional limitations of at-large seats. First, elections in at-large districts would entail much more expensive campaigns, thereby increasing the need for fund-raising and the candidates’ reliance on contributions. Additionally, since the at-large council members would appeal to the same group of voters as the mayor and other city-wide elected officials, their presence may create additional tension between the council and executive offices, especially on issues where individual elected officials are jockeying for city-wide leadership. Finally, some observers may consider at-large council seats to be less democratic alternatives to local seats since they are not as “close to the people.” The use of a hybrid system like the one proposed for the Metro Council (i.e., combination of local and at-large districts) should mitigate this concern, as a number of local seats would remain.

### **Conclusion**

The evidence on the impact of at-large seats demonstrates that they offer several important benefits, including wider perspective and increased fiscal responsibility. In addition, multi-member at-large districts with cumulative voting appear to offer an alternative that would not harm minority representation relative to the current electoral system in EBR Parish. In sum, the balance of evidence suggests that introducing two or more multi-member at-large seats with cumulative voting arrangements should be strongly considered by the Metro Council and the voters of EBR Parish.