

## **Recommendations**

### **DRAFT**

Viewing the city of Richmond as a whole, it is clear that poverty and its consequences are both a major burden on the city's residents and the principal barrier to achieving an improved quality of urban life and a more vibrant, dynamic city of Richmond. Consequently, the city should have a political structure that assures that most if not all elected representatives have a strong, compelling reason to pay close attention to issues of poverty both within their own districts and in the city as a whole. Politicians often have a variety of motives, but concern for their own electoral future is the most consistent and reliable reason for politicians to pay attention to a particular issue. Hence, the importance of placing the distribution of poverty front and center as the city considers redistricting.

This report has argued for two major principles with respect to poverty and redistricting. First, districts should be internally diverse and politically competitive. Political competition is a major way to hold elected officials accountable, and gives candidates strong incentives to pay attention to the concerns of all neighborhoods and all blocs of voters within their districts. In competitive districts, every vote truly counts, and competitive elections make it more likely that residents will not only vote but also pay close attention to local elections and the issues in play. (Now that Council and School Board elections are aligned with presidential elections, this is an important consideration: ensuring the Richmond voters of all demographic backgrounds not only vote, but pay as much attention to local races as the national election.) In addition, internally diverse districts encourage candidates to reach across demographic lines and make possible the formation of cross-cutting coalitions on behalf of particular candidates.

Second, we argue that poverty should be sufficiently dispersed across districts such that a majority of districts have poverty rates close to or exceeding the citywide average. There are four rationales for this principle. First, distributing poverty across districts expresses the idea and the reality that poverty is a shared problem for the city as a whole, not just an issue affecting a few neighborhoods or areas of the city. Second, if poverty is indeed to be addressed as a major policy priority over the next decade, it is crucial that a strong majority of Council and School Board members have a direct stake in the issue. Third, having a majority of members who are invested in poverty increases the potential leverage of low-income residents and supportive organizations when they engage in advocacy; they can make their case to many elected officials, not a small number. Fourth, distributing poverty widely is an equal public services issue, insofar as direct attention from council members and school board members to neighborhoods or blocks experiencing severe problems is an important public service. It is impossible for elected officials, no matter how committed or well-intentioned, to pay full attention to all the issues that need attention if they represent an area simply overloaded with high-poverty blocks and neighborhoods and the challenges these present.

Analysis of the distribution of poverty across the existing (2000) Council districts has shown that substantial rates of poverty, close to or exceeding the city-wide average, are present in seven of the districts. Hence, the distribution of poverty across districts in Richmond already approximates some of the aims of a “targeted dispersal” approach. However, there are two glaring exceptions. First, the affluent 1<sup>st</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> Districts have much lower poverty rates than the rest of the city. This imbalance could only be rectified by taking a radical approach to redistricting: starting the map over from scratch. Second, the 6<sup>th</sup> Gateway District has a vastly disproportionate share of the city’s residents who live in poverty. Roughly 40% of the District’s residents live at or below the poverty threshold, and a much higher number can be considered low-income (below the median income for the city). Three of the six largest public housing developments in the city, including Hillside Court, Whitcomb Court, and most of Mosby Court, are in the 6<sup>th</sup> District.

We believe that the most realistic short-term possibility for redressing this imbalance of poverty across districts would involve finding ways to move some poverty out of the 6<sup>th</sup> District into districts which now have less than the city’s average poverty rate. Here we present two possibilities. The first, Plan A, can be considered a “tweak” to the existing map and the redistricting proposal before Council currently (May 17<sup>th</sup> version).

Plan A involves three moving parts. First, shift the Hillside Court area in Tract 607, Block Group 2 (about 1,500 residents in 2000) from the Sixth District to the Eighth District. Second, move a comparable number of residents (1,500) in Tract 706 from the Eighth District to the Ninth District. Third, move a similar number of residents (roughly 1,500) from Tracts 108 and/or 107 in the Third District to the Sixth District.

This set of shifts would accomplish three things. First, it would mean that the six public housing developments in the City with over 400 units would now be distributed across four rather than three council districts. Second, it would help reduce the overall poverty rate in the Sixth District in two ways—by moving the Hillside Court block into the 8<sup>th</sup>, and by adding in persons from the lower-poverty Tracts 107 and/or 108 in the adjoining Third District. (Tract 108 is already largely in the Sixth District, but a piece is in the Third District). Third, it would slightly increase the poverty rate in the Ninth District, which currently has a poverty rate slightly below the city average.

We present this plan for consideration, but have elected not to make specific recommendations on which particular blocks might be moved (apart from the Hillside Court area) in order to make this plan work. Implementing this plan obviously must take account of the other legal requirements of redistricting, especially population balance between districts.

We also present for consideration Plan B, a more ambitious approach to reducing poverty levels in the 6<sup>th</sup> District. Under this plan, all of Tract 607 (roughly 4450 people, with a poverty rate of 32%) would move from the 6<sup>th</sup> District to the 8<sup>th</sup> District, and all of Tracts 107 (roughly 2800 people, with a poverty rate of 19%) and all of Tract 108

(largely already in the Sixth, with a poverty rate of 18%) would move from the Third District to the Sixth. We estimate that these shifts would reduce the poverty rate in the Sixth District by about three percentage points. Implementing this plan would require further shifts of population in almost every other district as well so as to achieve population balance; some persons would have to move from the 8<sup>th</sup> to the 9<sup>th</sup>, from the 9<sup>th</sup> to the 4<sup>th</sup>, and so on around the city map.

Both Plan A and Plan B represent very modest shifts in existing districting as well as the proposed redistricting plan now before Council. They present the possibility of tangible improvements, especially in distributing the larger public housing communities more widely, but do not represent a major alteration to the city's current political geography. In particular, they do not alter the fundamental fact that the 1<sup>st</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> Districts as presently drawn are markedly more affluent and have lower poverty than the other districts in the city.

Consequently, we also present for consideration Plan C. Plan C would involve two steps: first, starting over from scratch in drawing the City's electoral map, and second, exploring whether it might be much easier to achieve the goals of internally diverse, competitive districts and balancing poverty across districts if the number of districts in the city were reduced to five or seven. Given the existing income segregation in the city, a quick look at the map shows that even if we started from scratch, the only way to achieve balanced, economically diverse districts in a City of nine districts would be by abandoning the popular principle that districts should in some sense reflect recognized neighborhood boundaries. (For instance, in theory it would be possible to draw nine districts that each extended the entire breadth of the city, East-West, in tiger stripe fashion). If we wish to preserve the idea of districts linked to neighborhoods, it will likely prove much easier to achieve economically balanced districts with, for instance, five districts. The concentration of high incomes in the city's West End essentially guarantees that it will be one district markedly more affluent than the others, but with five districts it would be quite possible to assure that four of the districts had both poverty rates at or exceeding the city average as well as substantial internal diversity. Any particular plan would require careful thought and consideration, and we are aware that reducing the number of districts in the city would require a change in the city's charter. Nonetheless, we believe that the pros and cons of this possibility merit consideration.

In addition to the distribution of poverty across electoral districts, this commission explored a number of related issues that we wish to address here. In particular, we were asked by Mayor Jones to consider issues raised by the dramatic growth of Hispanic and Latino residents in the city since 2000, a trend that is expected to continue over the coming decade. As discussed above, we believe that the clustering of the emerging Hispanic population into a small number of districts should encourage the political incorporation of the Hispanic community, by assuring they have sufficient mass to command political weight in elections. An examination of current data indicates that such clustering is already in fact happening. Nearly two-thirds (65%) of Hispanics in the City now live in the (2000 definition) 8<sup>th</sup> and 9<sup>th</sup> Districts. Hispanics now substantially outnumber non-Hispanic whites in the 9<sup>th</sup> District, and will probably surpass the number

of non-Hispanic whites in the 8<sup>th</sup> District within the next five years. Analysis of American Community Survey data (2005-2009) show that three tracts within the city have a Hispanic population greater than 18%: Tract 608 (20%; 8<sup>th</sup> District); Tract 706 (25%; 8<sup>th</sup> District); and Tract 708.01 (19%; 9<sup>th</sup> District). The next highest tracts are Tract 710.02 (11%; largely 9<sup>th</sup>, partly in 4<sup>th</sup> District), Tract 609 (10%; Eighth District), Tract 708.02 (9%, Eighth District), and Tract 703 (9%, 4<sup>th</sup> District). The three larger tracts (Tracts 608, 706, and 708.01) are not geographically contiguous.

In theory it might be possible to carve out districts that concentrate Hispanic residents even more tightly than they already are, by radically redrawing the boundaries of the 8<sup>th</sup> and 9<sup>th</sup> Districts (in particular, moving Tract 708.01 from the 9<sup>th</sup> District to the 8<sup>th</sup> District). We do not recommend this course of action for four reasons. First, Hispanic voters are already very concentrated. Second, the growth of the Hispanic population is likely to be rapid over the course of the next decade and beyond. The exact contours of this growth cannot be known in advance, and hence it is unwise to draw lines that will apply to future elections based on the current snapshot. Third, the City should not send the message that a particular district or area of town is “the Hispanic area”; rather it should make clear that Hispanics are welcome in all areas of the city. Clustering of Hispanics into particular neighborhoods should be voluntary, not the product of political engineering. Fourth, in the long-term the political interests of Hispanics would likely be better served by having multiple districts in which their numbers are sufficiently large to have tangible political influence, rather than just one district.

We do recommend that the City and its elected officials act proactively to incorporate Hispanics into the local political process by encouraging registration, voter education, and other targeted efforts. It is critically important for the City’s future that this new bloc of residents be incorporated into full political membership in Richmond. Success in doing so will enhance the city’s reputation as a community welcoming of diversity and a city that is prepared to move far beyond the dated 20<sup>th</sup> century black-white paradigm of urban politics. Failure to do so will needlessly create a more divided city in which too many residents feel marginalized and alienated from the political process.

Other issues considered by the commission included the distribution of polling places, the provision of voting infrastructure in the city, encouragement of voter registration, restoration of felon voting rights, and the long-term effects of proposed public housing redevelopments within the city of Richmond.

In particular we recommend that:

- 1) The distribution of polling places within the city be closely analyzed and made as equitable as possible in terms of travel time to polling places for all voters.
- 2) That voting infrastructure in all parts of the city (number of machines, etc.) be provided in sufficient quantity in all parts of the city to accommodate high levels of voter turnout. The standards for participation set in the historic 2008

election should be seen as the benchmark, and local officials should prepare for yet higher levels of turnout in 2012 and beyond. Infrastructure should be provided on the expectation that voters in all parts of the city are expected to participate at a high level.

- 3) The City and its elected officials must continue and enhance efforts to expand political participation by all its residents, in particular persons living in or near poverty and/or in areas of highly concentrated poverty, as well amongst the emerging Hispanic population. The severe imbalance in voter participation rates between the poorer and affluent parts of the city should not be accepted as normal or desirable. Special effort should be made to encourage these residents to register to vote and vote, and also to participate in local government in other forms, such as membership in civic organizations and attendance and participation in public hearings and meetings. Continued targeted civic participation initiatives aimed at low-income communities, building on the existing Neighbor-to-Neighbor program, must be considered a high priority in shaping a more representative political system that truly hears the voices of all its citizens.
- 4) A major impediment to voter registration and other political mobilization efforts is the impact of state laws concerning ex-felon's voting rights. In Virginia, such rights must be restored by specific application to the government. An unknown number of persons in Richmond are disenfranchised by this state law, but there is no question that the burden falls primarily on African-American males and that the burden falls disproportionately on higher-poverty neighborhoods within the city. We recommend that the City make greatly enhanced outreach to assist ex-felons with applying to have their voting rights restored. We also recommend that the City undertake an extensive educational campaign to educate citizens about their rights in this regard. Many young men who have never been convicted of a felony may incorrectly believe that they are not eligible to vote just because in the past they have been detained by police for less serious reasons. A major effort should be made to educate and correct misinformation about voting rights, so as to expand political enfranchisement of all Richmond residents.
- 5) Finally, we urge that City Council members think carefully about the distribution of poverty within the city and how this is likely to be affected by planned redevelopment of public housing communities in Gilpin Court and elsewhere over the next 10-15 years. Existing plans call for some residents to remain in the re-developed, mixed income "North Jackson Ward," but others will have to move to other public housing units or Section 8 apartments. This redevelopment has the potential to reduce the concentration of poverty in Richmond, and more importantly, help reduce poverty in the city. But this can only take place if parts of the city that now have lower-than-average poverty absorb a substantial number of low-income residents now living in Gilpin

Court (and eventually, other public housing communities), and if such residents are provided strong support in adjusting to their new neighborhoods and connecting with new economic opportunities. Simply moving persons from Gilpin Court to other high-poverty areas of the city will do very little either to deconcentrate poverty or to help the individuals concerned improve their economic prospects and/or quality-of-life. This is an important conversation the city of Richmond needs to have, and will require buy-in from elected officials and citizens in all parts of the city. Effective deconcentration and subsequent reduction of poverty cannot happen if any one part of the city is expected to absorb former public housing community residents; instead, a strategy is needed that will allow the residents to move to many different parts of the city, in numbers that are manageable for each neighborhood. Only when all parts of the city are involved will it be possible to assure that public housing redevelopment leads to reduction of poverty and real improvements in quality-of-life throughout the city.