

PUBLIC HEARING
City of Albany Redistricting Commission
August 24, 2022

Statement of Richard Conti

My name is Richard Conti. I currently reside at 151 Chestnut Street in the City of Albany. I am also a previous member of the Albany Common Council representing the 6th Ward. My comments tonight are general in nature and focus on factors the Commission should take into consideration as you undertake your redistricting charge. At this point I have not seen specific draft maps for this hearing to comment on.

As a 24-year member of the Common Council prior to retiring at the end of 2021, I experienced two Common Council redistricting processes after the 2000 and 2010 US Census findings. In each case, the Commission overseeing redistricting of the Common Council in accordance with those respective Census reports took into consideration then existing Ward lines and neighborhood boundaries in adopting a final plan in accordance with population and demographic requirements. This process provided a level of continuity in representation rather than upending ward lines in a way that disrupted established relationships. As a result of the current lines, the Common Council that was elected in 2021 is the most diverse in the history of the City of Albany.

Absent the availability of proposed draft redistricting maps, the following comments are meant to outline general considerations for the Commission to consider in developing its proposed plan.

Continuity of Representation and Communities of Interest

It's important to understand that district boundaries are more than lines on a map with population figures. Each district represents a community with real people, shared interests and neighborhoods that reflect communities of interest. Understanding that there have been population shifts that will necessitate adjustments to current ward lines, please seek to maintain current districts to the extent possible. Maintaining continuity of representation is important, as over a ten-year period constituents develop relationships and understandings of ward lines. Upending those ward lines can impact civic engagement and voter participation in the electoral process.

Ward Residency Requirements and Incumbent Protection

Last year voters adopted a Albany Charter amendment establishing a one-year residency requirement within a ward as a condition for running for office within a particular district. Prior to this amendment the residency requirement was a more general one-year residence anywhere within the city. During a redistricting year there is an exception for incumbents who may see their existing districts changed or eliminated in which case an incumbent may run in any district abutting their residence without meeting a residency requirement. This exception is applied on a discriminatory basis and does not apply to non-incumbents who may have been considering a run for elective office in the prior district. I call this incumbency protection. I raise this issue to caution that you not redraw lines in a way that it might be perceived that potential opponents to

an incumbent are being drawn out of a district to the advantage of an incumbent. This is especially relevant to the extent that district lines might be drawn to split neighborhoods.

Equity Agenda and Redistricting

In 2019 the Common Council adopted an Equity Agenda ordinance (Chapter 183 of the Albany City Code). The ordinance seeks to measure equitable investment in neighborhoods (capital projects, street repairs, infrastructure etc.) based on city ward lines. The measurement includes a retrospective four-year look back on capital project investments and road reconstruction etc. Because these investments are based on ward lines and not neighborhood boundaries (which are on file with the Planning Dept.), redistricting will require a retrospective adjustment in past capital investments to reflect new ward lines. Maintaining the continuity of existing ward lines will minimize the need for retrospective adjustments and investment measurements. Significant redrawing of ward lines could distort investment measurements, especially if neighborhoods with high investment levels are mixed with neighborhoods with traditionally lower investment levels. So I'd just caution to be cognizant of the impact of redistricting on how the Equity Agenda ordinance operates.

LGBTQ+ Political Voice

As an added observation, from someone who's been pretty involved in city politics since 1986, the four neighborhoods which form the core of the 6th Ward (Center Square, Hudson/Park, Park South and Washington Park) have been the heart of progressive politics in the City of Albany that challenged existing political orders and opened new opportunities for civic involvement and responsive government. They have also, and continue to be, the home of a large LGBTQ+ voting population that made those past victories possible and has been able to amplify the voice of LGBTQ+ people in our local political system.

The Albany County Redistricting Commission has put forth a plan that eliminates the 5th County Legislative District which is pretty much coterminous with the 6th Ward. The County plan dilutes the political voice of the LGBTQ+ community. I don't know if that is intentional, but that is the impact of the proposal in how it divides the existing 5th LD. This comes at a time when the LGBTQ+ community is facing new challenges nationally, and even locally, and needs to have a strong political voice. The County plan sends the wrong message. Frankly, I'm astonished that a plan to dilute the LGBTQ+ political voice is even being put forward on the County level. Afterall, this isn't Florida or Texas!

I strongly urge the City Commission to recognize the LGBTQ+ population as a community of interest with a concentration in the four neighborhoods that constitute the 6th Ward and to take no action which would dilute the political voice of the LGBTQ+ community.

The 6th Ward

Finally, as the former 6th Ward Council Member, a ward leader prior to that and a 36 year resident of the ward, I have a keen interest in maintaining the four core neighborhoods that constitute the 6th Ward as a continued single unit of representation. These four neighborhoods, on both the County and City levels, have traditionally shared the same unit of representation, represent similar communities of interest, are bound together by Lark Street as a uniting mixed-use commercial corridor and have a strong working relationship with each other. The Lark Street BID is the only one of the three City of Albany BIDs that is wholly contained within one City

Ward or County Legislative District, this has provided a level of cohesion in representation with city and county government that benefits its membership. The 6th Ward is unique in how these neighborhoods share the same unit of representation and work closely together on issues of public safety and neighborhood quality of life issues. Please maintain the existing 6th Ward as an identifiable unit of representation.

Conclusion

In the absence of draft maps, these comments are general and designed to outline considerations the Commission should take into consideration in finalizing its proposed redistricting plan. As draft maps become available I will most likely offer specific comments on those proposals.

Thank you for consideration of the issues I have raised here in this this statement.