Frequently Asked Questions

1. How did we get here?

Santa Clara has been engaged in work related to district elections for several years. Please see the following links for background on these efforts.

District Elections & Ad Hoc Districting Committee webpage
Court Ordered Districting Process webpage
Measure N Report to Council

2. Why is the City considering changing the election process?

Because Santa Clara is a Charter City, the method of election outlined in our charter can only be changed by a vote of the Santa Clara electorate. This means that unless the charter is amended, we will go back to the at-large by-seat voting system once the court-ordered remedy expires in 2020. An advisory measure was put on the ballot in 2018 that asked Santa Clarans if they wanted to engage in a public process to change the method of election of Council to be by-districts with the Mayor elected at-large, which passed with over 70%.

3. What is Santa Clara's current Mayor and City Council election process?

The current election process follows the Charter language (Section 700) and the Court Order.

4. When would a Charter Amendment appear on the ballot?

If the recommended Charter Amendment language is approved by City Council on November 5, 2019, a proposed Charter Amendment would appear on the March 3, 2020 primary election ballot.

5. What is the current state of the lawsuit?

Santa Clara has appealed the judge's ruling. If the City prevails, the 2020 election will be under the at-large system in the City Charter, unless the Charter is amended at the March 2020 election.

6. What is the difference between at-large and district-based elections?

In an at-large election system, voters in the entire city elect the members of the City Council. In contrast, district-based elections divide a city into separate geographic districts, and voters within each district vote for candidates residing within their same district. In district-based elections, voters only vote for candidates in their own districts; they do not vote for candidates outside their district.

7. What are the pros and cons of by-district elections?

Pros:
- The council is guaranteed to have representation from all major areas of the City.
- Interested candidates only need to campaign in a smaller portion of the City.

Cons:
- Voters do not get an opportunity to select their Council outside of their immediate district.

8. What are the most likely options for districts?

A) 6 districts – 1 councilmember per district
   a. 3 districts vote for their councilmember in gubernatorial elections
   b. 3 districts vote for their councilmember in presidential elections
   c. The voter turnout for gubernatorial elections is less than in presidential elections.
   d. Voters do not get an opportunity to vote for a councilmember during each primary election.
   e. Voters get to influence the outcome of a single councilmember out of 6.

B) 3 districts – 2 councilmembers per district
   a. All 3 districts vote for a single councilmember in the gubernatorial election.
   b. All 3 districts vote for a single councilmember in the presidential election.
   c. Voter turnout is balanced since all districts have an election in both a gubernatorial and presidential election.
   d. All voters in all districts have an opportunity to vote for a councilmember in every election.
   e. Voters get to influence the outcome of 2 councilmembers out of 6.

C) 2 districts – 3 councilmembers per district
   a. Option 1:
      i. All 2 districts vote for a single councilmember in the gubernatorial election.
      ii. All 2 districts vote for 2 councilmembers in the presidential election.
      iii. Voter turnout is balanced since all districts have an election in both a gubernatorial and presidential election.
      iv. All voters in all districts have an opportunity to vote for a councilmember in every election.
   b. Option 2:
      i. 1 district votes for all 3 of their councilmembers in gubernatorial elections
      ii. 1 district votes for all 3 of their councilmembers in presidential elections
      iii. The voter turnout for gubernatorial elections is less than in presidential elections.
      iv. Voters do not get an opportunity to vote for a councilmember during each primary election.
   c. Voters get to influence the outcome of 3 councilmembers out of 6.

Developed by City Clerk Hosam Haggag