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Election reform plan gains powerful allies

By [Nancy Kaffer](#)

For the past eight years, [Publius.org](#) President Vince Keenan has worked with the **Detroit League of Women Voters** to produce an election guide.

This year, he's not sure where to start.

In Detroit's council races, the field of candidates is traditionally crowded. In 2001, 96 names appeared on the primary ballot. In 2005, there were 120.

By last week, 428 Detroiters had pulled petitions to run for a seat on Detroit's nine-member, at-large City Council, according to the **Department of Elections**.

The notion that **Detroit City Council** members should be elected by district is a perennial topic of discussion.

But this year, many of the city's most powerful groups are aligning in support of election reform. **Detroit Renaissance Inc.** and the **Detroit Regional Chamber** support the change outright, as does mayoral candidate Dave Bing.

Detroit Mayor Ken Cockrel Jr. has said he's open to the idea, and the **Council of Baptist Pastors of Detroit & Vicinity Inc.** is supporting a petition drive to place an election reform question on November's ballot.

"The chamber is supportive of council by district," said Dick Blouse, president and CEO of the Detroit Regional Chamber.

Blouse said residents of Detroit should take the lead on election reform, but said the chamber would work with any organization that was promoting such reform. And, he said, the chamber's political action committee will vote with its checkbook.

"I would strongly recommend our PAC not financially endorse or support any candidate running for City Council that did not support council by district," he said.

The league launched a petition drive to place the election reform question on last year's ballot, but the effort languished.

League President Mildred Madison said the group learned a lesson.

Working on this year's petition are Detroit **Association of Community Organizations for Reform Now** (ACORN), former state Rep. Steve Tobocman and Publius' Keenan — marking the first time the nonprofit, nonpartisan voter resource has played an active role in politics.

The league has obtained 10,000 signatures toward a required 31,500 and is planning a major push for May 5, the date of the mayoral special election.

At issue, Madison said, is access to government.

Detroit's eight serving council members are clustered geographically, with President Monica Conyers, President Pro Tem JoAnn Watson and members Sheila Cockrel and Kwame Kenyatta in the city's north central section; members Barbara-Rose Collins and Martha Reeves near downtown; and member Alberta Tinsley-Talabi on the city's near east side.

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Council members tend to live in the city's areas of highest income, said demographer Kurt Metzger, director of the **Detroit Area Community Information System**, but not in Detroit's most typical or highly populated regions.

No council member, for example, hails from Southwest Detroit, the city's fastest-growing area. Or the northeast side, another thickly populated area, Metzger said.

Critics of the at-large system say council members have no accountability to neighborhood businesses or residents, and that candidates with unknown names don't stand a chance of winning a seat.

Ken Cockrel estimates an unknown candidate would need to raise and spend \$500,000 to win.

For Keenan, the most important issue is voter education.

It's far from certain how many of the 428 Detroiters who have pulled petitions will file by the May 12 deadline. The ratio of petitions pulled to petitions filed for past primary elections wasn't available.

But with the potential for a ballot with hundreds of candidates, even the most dedicated voter would have a hard time finding a quality candidate, Keenan said.

Detroit Renaissance President Doug Rothwell said his group considers council by district a best practice for cities of Detroit's size.

"We're not at a point yet where we've engaged in any activity," he said. "We're trying to see what other groups think about the idea ... but we would be interested in talking to others who think it is a good idea and finding ways to work together."

The league's petition drive is just one road to election reform.

A charter revision question on the May 5 ballot could result in reform of the City's Council election system. Madison said supporters of election reform should sign the petition and vote for the charter revision commission.

The league's petition calls for a nine-member council with seven district representatives and two at-large members, who would serve as president and president pro tem of the council. Districts would be determined by population and redrawn after each census.

Metzger said it's not that simple.

Determining districts without a broad discussion of Detroit's shifting population isn't a workable plan, said Metzger, who supports council by district.

"The districts can't be drawn without some idea of where the population is going to be in the next 10 years," he said. "I wouldn't want to redistrict until someone has an agreed-upon plan."

And that discussion, Metzger said, just isn't happening.

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