Ward System Interviews, City of Bend Charter Review Committee

In an effort to understand the advantages and disadvantages of various systems of electing City Councilors, the Bend Charter Review Committee has interviewed representatives of six of the ten largest Oregon cities. They are Hillsboro, Gresham, Medford, Springfield, Eugene, and Corvallis. We opted not to interview Portland and Beaverton due to them having forms of government that are drastically different from Bend. Representatives were a range of Mayors, City Councilors and staff. They were asked a series of standardized questions, and unscripted follow up questions

In this review, we will address common ideas that were expressed by the interviewees and also outliers where there was not consensus. We will also share potential concerns shared by some interviewees. All ten of the largest cities have directly elected Mayors. Five of the six interviewed cities have some form of Wards. (see appendix) Springfield and Hillsboro require Councilors to live within districts but they are elected city wide.

1. <u>Does your Council system provide for direct citizen and community influence?</u> This was a very positive reaction from all of the interviewees, regardless of their current system.
   From Springfield: "People will call or come in to city hall and ask for **their** City Councilor." It is possessive.
   From Eugene: each Councilor goes to the Neighborhood Association meetings from their ward, which is not possible across the entire city. The Councilor gave two examples of citizen concerns that he believed would not have been addressed if not for their ward system.
   From Corvallis: Wards are extremely valued. All areas are heard.
   From Hillsboro: 3 wards with two councilors elected citywide on offset four year terms. Feel community influence is more a product of the individual Councilor then the system.
   From Gresham: yes.
   From Medford: yes, advantage of wards is councilor knows the issues where they live

2. <u>Does a ward system provide community members with accountability from City Councilors?</u>
   From Springfield: People feel attached to the city.
   From Eugene: Wards allow issues to have a focal point.
   From Corvallis: Seems strange that you would not have representation to all areas.
   From Hillsboro: As policy, they do not emphasize "ward thinking". Any concerns or complaints received by the city are distributed to all councilors.
   From Gresham: "I would not want to represent just *my people*." A NA representative stated "he lives in our neighborhood" in a meeting notice, it made the Councilor feel awkward. He believes he is invited to NA's because he because he is retired and will show up. Last year he went to 17 NA meetings, while average councilor went to three.
   From Medford: yes, people definitely know who their Councilor is. Councilors must have at least one ward meeting per year.

3. <u>Does a ward system provide for broader geographic community representation on City Committees and programs?</u>
    From Springfield: The Budget Committee is appointed by ward. Other committees are open but very diverse
    From Eugene: They are actively recruiting for more diversity on their committees. Typically, affluent are disproportionately represented.
    From Corvallis: They have substantial diversity but it is the same 50 to 100 people that serve on multiple committees.
    From Hillsboro: No, they have a hard time drawing applicants for committees from **any** area. Council and staff agree that they need to develop diversity in committees and council. Population is 60% white.
    From Gresham: There are 14 NA's that are very active and two that are essentially defunct. They provide a voice.
    From Medford: All 24 committees, commissions, boards have at least 1 citizen from each ward, but equal representation on groups has been hard to accomplish finding volunteers.

4. <u>Does a ward system lead to broader diversity beyond geographic on the City Council? ie. Socio-economic, gender, race, etc.</u>
    From Springfield: Majority women on council, all but one are retired.
    From Eugene: Three of eight councilors are female (one is 92), one black man. Mayor is female. All forms of diversity aided by wards.
    From Corvallis: five of nine councilors are female (one is a single mom of two).
    From Hillsboro: Doesn't seem to work either way.
    From Gresham: two female, four male, one Hispanic.
    From Medford: Wards help with broader diversity, young single mom just elected, has done a great job of bringing low income issues forward. She would not have been elected city wide.

5. <u>What is your city doing to increase diversity on the Council?</u>
    From Springfield: Nothing actively being done
    From Eugene: Councilors actively recruit when they intend not to run for re-election
    From Corvallis: Open houses regarding being a councilor
    From Hillsboro: Starting a Civic Leadership Academy
    From Gresham: individual councilor outreach into varying communities, "catalyst site" to help minorities start business
    From Medford: Individual Councilors reach out to find their replacement

6. <u>Is gerrymandering a concern with having a ward system?</u>
    From Springfield: No complaints, city adjusts wards following census
    From Eugene: No complaints
    From Corvallis: Gerrymandering has not been an issue, no angst created when re-configured.
    From Hillsboro: No. 2007 charter review established regular census based redistricting with no complaints on first try.
    From Gresham: not an issue in Gresham
    From Medford: not an issue

7. Does a ward system create an environment for cooperation amongst Councilors or do Councilors tend to seek to benefit his/her own ward?
   From Springfield: Very cooperative amongst councilors
   From Eugene: Cooperation more indicative of political leanings than wards
   From Corvallis: Reasonably successful on having balanced council decisions, but certain areas of town would have no voice without wards. Councilors would not vote against something unless it was drastically bad for their ward.
   From Hillsboro: Councilors are very cooperative with each other.
   From Gresham: Councilors are all elected fairly broadly across the city.
   From Medford: Councilors work well together to help all wards. From a staff standpoint, wards help reduce massive swings of direction from council.

8. How does the cost of running a council campaign differ between wards and at large positions?
   From Springfield: only $5,000 for typical council campaign
   From Eugene: Never had an empty ballot. Cost varies substantially by contest. $24,000 for ward council race, over $1mm for citywide Mayor.
   From Corvallis: Both Mayor and Councilors are mostly door to door and mailings. (all but two candidates have stayed under mandatory reporting requirements in his memory)
   From Hillsboro: Staff not aware of cost of campaigns
   From Gresham: it would be more expensive to run in a ward, no reason given
   From Medford: typically, people spend below the mandatory reporting threshold. One out of ten in the last election had to report.

9. Does your city Council system have any perceived impact on the diversity of your committees?
   From Springfield: Committees have good diversity
   From Eugene: Yes, Issues would definitely get lost without wards
   From Corvallis: There is substantial diversity
   From Hillsboro: Wards do not impact committee appointments. Hard finding applicants at all.
   From Gresham: look for a variety of opinions NOT flame throwers.
   From Medford: "Wards are a huge benefit to diversity."

10. Have there been any efforts to return to (or to create) citywide elections in place of Wards? For Gresham; What were the reasons your community chose not to go to a ward system?
    From Springfield: No consideration of changing current system; Hybrid 6 wards (live in ward, elected citywide) "I don't see any advantages to Bend's [current] system". Council would lose diversity if at large. Springfield's westside is more affluent but diversity is spread across city. Elected citywide forces councilors to work citywide. Full ward would probably work too if councilors understand they represent the whole city. Councilors do not focus on ward specifics but there is expectation of "my Councilor."
    From Eugene: "I can't imagine that happening. There is just no way the people would accept that." Thinks two elected at large would create multiple problems. ("Junior Mayors"). All wards should be equal. Ward population doesn't matter but no more than eight Councilors. Number of Councilors more important for division of labor.

From Corvallis: Investigating Charter Review focused on compensation and decreasing number of Councilors from current nine, 4 year terms, there is no discussion of citywide elections, "the electorate would not support that. It just would not fly."

From Hillsboro: No Efforts. Has not been brought up.

From Gresham: Interviewee was not present during citizen referendum to switch to wards.

From Medford: Never heard of anyone wanting to go to city wide election. "I would think that it would be met with very strong resistance. People would perceive it as a power grab by the wealthy."

Common Thoughts and Ideas from City Interviews

1. There is a common feeling amongst the five "ward cities" that wards bring citizens closer to their government, that all areas are better represented, and that many citizen issues would never be addressed if not for wards. Most cities are socio-economically segregated to certain areas of town.

2. Wards by definition create geographic Diversity on the Council. Responses were mixed on if wards assisted in other types of diversity. Two positive responses gave examples of single moms that were able to successfully run "door knock campaigns" in less affluent wards.

3. All five cities with wards felt strongly there was no chance that the cities would ever consider changing to a citywide election. Gresham had a citizen referendum fail in 2012 to change to wards.

4. Most of the cities have found that ward council races are relatively inexpensive. In most instances, they felt candidates spent under the mandatory reporting level. Many felt that increasing Councilor pay would attract more people to run. Gresham is highest at $20,000 per year for Council.

5. All six reported a "city first" attitude amongst councilors. Few could think of any examples of parochialism run amok. Many suggested a strong councilor training program is vital.

6. The cities, where we interviewed city staff, felt wards help to eliminate massive swings in directions to staff from their council.

7. The cities have not had any issues getting people to run for City Council from wards. Success of getting volunteers for committees and boards varied substantially by city. All of the cities expressed that many times a retiring Councilor will "shoulder tap" and mentor someone to run for their seat.

8. No one expressed any issues with complaints of gerrymandering. All have different ways to reconfigure wards after the federal census.

9. Very strong support that Mayors should be directly elected and serve four year terms. Most Mayors vote only to break ties.

10. Very strong support that Councilors should serve four year terms. Some cities require that Councilors hold at least one public ward meeting per year. The cities all have a variety of ward systems concerning number of wards, number of councilors, number of councilors per ward and how elected.