

Information Item

Date: June 15, 2020

To: Mayor, Mayor Pro Tempore, and Members of the City Council

From: Ben Rowe, Assistant City Manager
Scott Tesh, Performance and Accountability Director

Subject:
Winston-Salem Local Governance Study Commission Process and Recommendations

Strategic Focus Area: Service Excellence

Strategic Objective: No

Strategic Plan Action Item: No

Key Work Item: Yes



The Winston-Salem Local Governance Study Commission (Commission) is an 11- member, non-partisan study commission created by Members of the North Carolina General Assembly and Mayor Allen Joines to initiate a review process of local elections and governance structure. The Commission was created after Members of the General Assembly filed House Bill 519 during the 2019 session of the General Assembly. House Bill 519 would have made significant changes in how the Winston-Salem City Council was structured and elected, including the creation of at-large seats on the City Council, changing mayoral voting rights, and shortening council member terms to two years.

The Commission was co-chaired by Steve Berlin, the managing partner of the Kilpatrick Townsend law firm, and Dr. David Branch, a local ophthalmologist and community leader. The Commission membership was comprised of experts in governance, neighborhood leaders, community activists, and other civic leaders, all of whom were residents of and/or business owners in Winston-Salem.

The Commission gathered information on topics related to their charge from subject matter experts in the fields of elections law and governance. This included presentations from Robert Joyce, Professor of Public Law and Government at the UNC School of Government, and Allison Riggs, Chief Counsel for Voting Rights at the Southern Coalition for Social Justice. The Commission also sought insight from experienced local government practitioners, former City Managers Jim Westmoreland (Greensboro, NC) and Roger Stancil (Fayetteville, NC and Chapel Hill, NC). The Commission also heard from former Mayors Bill Bell (Durham, NC) and Robbie Perkins (Greensboro, NC) in similarly-sized cities who had at-large council representation. The Commission also reviewed research on other cities in North Carolina on nine different dimensions of elections and governance structure.

The Commission held three public input sessions to educate residents on the charge of the Commission and to receive feedback on the elections and governance issues at hand. The Commission also created a public survey (non-random sampling therefore not statistically significant) and received more than 900 responses to the survey in online and paper format. The Commission also polled the Winston-Salem City Council on their opinions.

The Commission took votes on nine topics related to local elections protocols ultimately recommending only one change to the current structure: the addition of two at-large city council seats. The Commission's recommendation for this change was taken in two votes. The first vote was recorded 8-1 in favor of having more at-large representation on City Council. The second vote was 8-1 in favor of adding two new seats, as opposed to converting current ward (district) seats into at-large seats.

City staff will provide a presentation on the process and recommendations from the Commission.