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OPINION

The case for preserving District 1 as San Antonio's downtown district



by **Robert Rivard**
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H-E-B's headquarters occupies a large swath of land along César E. Chávez Boulevard in District 1. Credit: Nick Wagner / San Antonio Report

Has the city of San Antonio outgrown its 10 City Council districts? That's possible, perhaps inevitable, but it would take a charter reform election in 2023 to expand to, say, 12 districts. In the meantime, a **citizens advisory committee** appointed by Mayor Ron Nirenberg and City Council is working tirelessly and thanklessly to redraw the 10 district boundary lines in the wake of the 2020 U.S. Census.

That is no easy feat in one of the country's fastest-growing, most sprawling cities. As the population continues to shift to the northwest, north, and to a lesser degree, northeast, it becomes increasingly difficult for map makers to comply with federal law and fit equal numbers of people into the inner city districts.

District 1, where my family lives in Precinct 1001, required the addition of citizens — more than 8,400 — to assure its population would be within 10% of all other district populations. With more than 100,000 new residents added to the city rolls since the 2010 Census, the target population is 143,494 for each district.



The redistricting committee has convened at least 13 public meetings since beginning its work in January, and there have been twice that many presentations to neighborhood groups and at district level meetings as council members vie to reshape political representation and gain power. Working directly and through their appointed committee members, the

process among council members has become, unsurprisingly, highly politicized and contentious.

That has been most evident in an unsuccessful effort by District 7 to carve out some of the South Texas Medical Center from District 8, and as District 1 and 2 representatives and members of the public have fought over Brackenridge Park and whether it will remain in both Districts 1 and 2 or be placed solely in District 1.

Committee members voted to [move the park into District 1](#) on May 31, but then reversed that decision after an intense [4 1/2-hour meeting](#) Tuesday night.

Now the future of District 1, which for more than 50 years has served as the “downtown district,” is the subject of a tug-of-war with District 5. At stake are various businesses, notably the largest downtown employer, H-E-B, and its headquarters campus at the historic Arsenal. Cultural assets, including San Pedro Creek and Market Square in Precinct 2051 also are being fought over. Advocates for District 5 are pushing for both District 1 precincts to be shifted into what traditionally has been the Westside district.

Committee members previously drew a line through the H-E-B campus, where 2,000 workers are employed, leaving part of the headquarters in District 1 while placing the other part in District 5. The committee reversed that previous decision Tuesday night after San Antonio Chamber of Commerce President and CEO Richard Perez urged members to leave the central business district intact.

But Tuesday night’s vote was not the last word. A key meeting will take place Saturday at City Hall at 2 pm. If the past is any guide, committee members will be influenced by the turnout at the public hearing. Business leaders and neighborhood residents seldom attend such meetings, which favor activists and other organized groups who sign up to speak publicly. Click here to [sign up](#) to attend and speak.



As noted above, I live in Precinct 1001, which also is home to H-E-B headquarters. I have not been attending the advisory committee meetings, and like my neighbors and executives at H-E-B, I had no inkling our precinct was being shifted into District 5 until after the advisory committee's initial vote. Few of us were paying close attention to the process, and there has been no individual outreach to precinct residents by city staff.

If Precinct 1001 remains in District 1, as now agreed by advisory committee members, there will only be a 16-person difference in the populations of 1 and 5, and the currently underpopulated 1 will be within 8% of the other nine districts.

I haven't spoken to a single person in the Arsenal Overlay District who wants to move from District 1 to District 5. No one asked us, and no one told us our precinct was targeted by District 5 representatives. It seems even crazier to me to move or bisect H-E-B, which has invested heavily in expansion of its campus in recent years, out of the central business district.

That said, I don't have a vote. But I do feel strongly enough to spend my Saturday afternoon attending the advisory committee meeting at City Hall to make sure my voice is heard. Democracy is messy, often time-consuming, and it doesn't stop for weekends.

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– **Ron Rietz** 2 hours ago

One of any city's features, at least for it's residents, is the neighborhoods. Splitting a neighborhood is like taking an axe to it, destroying the fabric of the city.

A modest increase to the number of councilmen seems like it might be a good thing to do, an odd number would greatly reduce tie votes. We have ten councilmen, plus an at large right now. Thirteen is an unlucky number in many cultures. How about fifteen councilmen plus an at large mayor?

many careers. How about fifteen councilmen, plus an at large mayor.

The voting precinct is too small of an area to consider in the initial cut for carving up the city. How about we start with, say, elementary school attendance zones, going down to the precinct level only if absolutely needed to meet the requirements of state laws? Never, ever split a voting precinct.

Drawing arbitrary lines can make for strange shaped political subdivisions as well as strained relationships between neighbors.

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– **BobBevard** 14 hours ago

Wow!

I suggest due to the ongoing growth of COSA's population, ten districts are insufficient for council people to adequately represent constituencies.

Basic arithmetic suggests twelve won't be sufficient, how about fifteen or nineteen? Additionally, think about how interesting votes could be if Council has an odd number and the Mayor only votes on ties.

Respectfully,

Bob

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– **TraderBill** 1 day ago

Welcome to the ongoing cat fights among the district committee members. I have watched many of the earlier committee meetings on live stream and have seen these same disputes play out all over the city. (The tongue-lashing by one of the D8 members toward her D7 colleagues over the medical center is especially memorable). In another odd but seemingly necessary change, D1 apparently will shift far enough north to consume part of D9 near Phil Hardberger Park, a decision which makes the residents of that part of town wonder how they have any connection to the downtown area. The simple answer is that the redistricting is based on resident population, not on the people who spend their working day in one district but go home to

another.

Dividing the city into twelve districts may be the answer After watching the



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