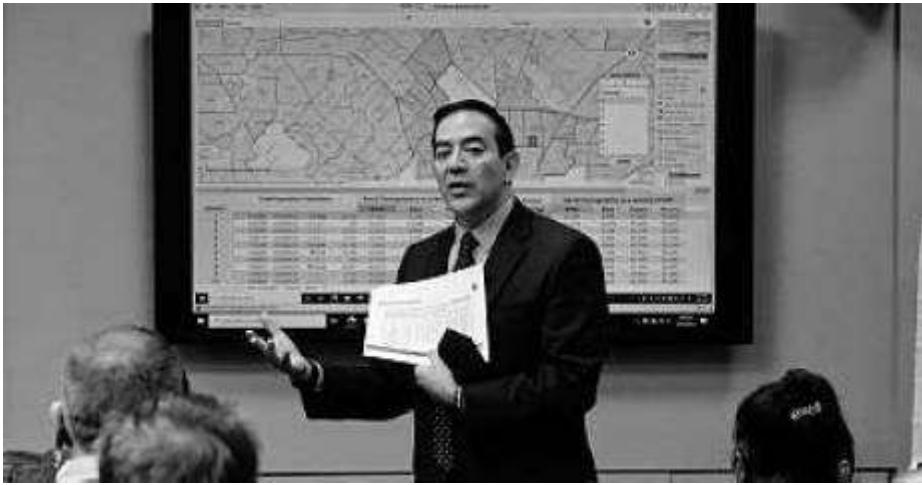


Businesses pan downtown split in maps

By Megan Stringer STAFF WRITER



Kin Man Hui/Staff file photo

Attorney Tony Resendez addresses the city's Redistricting Advisory Committee during a meeting earlier this year.

Last-minute protests from the downtown business community this week blew up months of careful planning and negotiation for a new City Council map.

Downtown San Antonio has been in District 1 for decades. But a new City Council map scheduled for approval this month split the area between District 1 and District 5 on the West Side.

Included in the draft map released in April, the change met no resistance from a

redistricting committee appointed by members of the City Council. The committee has been meeting regularly to redraw City Council district boundaries based on new U.S. Census numbers released last year.

But Richard Perez, president of the San Antonio Chamber of Commerce and former District 4 councilman, asked the committee Tuesday night to unify the central business district.

“The central business district’s continued viability is important to the overall economic recovery and success of our community,” Perez said. “We believe now is not the time to begin to slice off sections of the central business district and risk diminishing this important economic engine.”

It’s important for downtown to have one voice, Perez later said. With one council person managing downtown’s needs, they can give full attention to the area.

An initial committee vote approved the change narrowly, 12 to 9. If it remains in place, downtown will stay primarily within District 1. City Hall, the Children's Hospital of San Antonio, San Pedro Creek, Market Square, H-E-B headquarters and more would have shifted to District 5 in the original map.

An H-E-B spokesperson said the company was concerned when it realized —just recently — its headquarters would have been split between District 1 and District 5. The company prefers to sit in a single council district rather than be cut in half.

“It’s inconceivable to us that Frost could be separated from the rest of the central business district after being part of the central business district for 154 years,” said Phil Green, Frost Bank CEO and chairman of the San Antonio Chamber of Commerce. “It seems like common sense that when steps are taken to keep neighborhoods and communities intact in council districts, the same efforts would be made for the central business district.”

Perez said he's heard from downtown businesses that just became aware they would be affected. The public maps have been difficult to interpret, with labeled streets not always readily viewable. Perez said he only learned of the proposed changes himself last week.

Politics could also be at play. District 5 Councilwoman Teri Castillo has situated herself as a progressive who staunchly supports labor and workers' rights — issues often at odds with the business community.

One City Hall insider also said District 5 may want something such as an H-E-B headquarters and other major business operations inside its boundaries.

“If they have to come to you to ask for something like an incentive,” the insider said, “you then leverage to ask for something.” That could be a higher pay scale for workers or consideration of future projects in the council member's district.

Tension brewed and residents and committee members grew visibly distressed Tuesday as they discussed the request. Previously contentious votes came back up for discussion. The prospect of Los Jardines regaining a portion of its neighborhood in District 6, which residents have long asked for, was again placed on the bargaining table. The committee also voted to send half of Brackenridge Park back to East Side District 2 instead of placing it entirely in District 1.

District 5 representatives said they had no idea District 1 was going to ask to maintain downtown. Amy Kastely, one of the District 5 appointees, accused Jordan Ghawi, a District 1 appointee, of retaliating against her for her vote on Brackenridge Park, though Ghawi disputed that characterization.

“I think it's a real perversion of our fair process,” said Kastely, a law professor at the St Mary's University School of Law.

She said the move wasn't transparent for residents who didn't speak up because they thought it was settled. In the end, the committee added a meeting tentatively scheduled for 2 p.m. Saturday pending a location. They plan to only discuss the areas of the map that came unscrewed Tuesday — downtown and Los Jardines.

The eleventh-hour proposals suggested a rift in the committee's ability to work together and agree on a final map with just more than a week left to make adjustments.

City Council is slated to vote on new map at its June 16 meeting next week. Mayor Ron Nirenberg has asked for a straight yes or no vote, without making changes, to build trust in what he created to be an independent committee free from the politics of elected officials.

In arguing District 1 should recapture downtown, Ghawi made a case for the numbers. The prior final proposed map left District 1 with the least population and gave the overall map a deviation of just under the legally permissible 10 percent.

But returning portions of downtown from District 5 to District 1 brings the entire map's deviation closer to 8 percent. Legally, it won't make a difference, but residents have called for the smallest deviation possible to ensure equity among city voters.

“It will bring back much-needed population that's already sparsely populated in our district, District 1,” said Theresa Vargas Wyatt, another District 1 appointee. “These also have significant assets.”

But the western edge of downtown also holds historical value for the West Side, Kastely said. Residents from the area will want to come out and talk about the change if confronted with it.

“I’m struggling,” said Shelley Potter, one of Nirenberg’s appointees to the committee. “This feels like all the sudden here, and I’m a little uncomfortable with that.”

The marathon push on Tuesday to find compromises again opened up the possibility of returning parts of Los Jardines to District 6. A prior compromise split the neighborhood and parts of the Old Highway 90 business community between districts 5 and 6, moving Cuellar Park and the Edgewood Fine Arts Academy into District 5.

Residents have repeatedly spoken out against that change, saying they built a strong relationship with District 6 Councilwoman Melissa Cabello Havrda and her office. After the question of downtown’s placement opened up, Kastely offered to return a portion of Los Jardines to District 6 if District 5 could keep its hold on downtown.

The debate over downtown overshadowed another expected vote Tuesday on Brackenridge Park. The plan placed all of the 349-acre park into District 1, instead of keeping it split between districts 1 and 2.

Residents of River Road, who see themselves as closely entwined with ongoing issues at Brackenridge Park, wanted the entire park in their District 1. They said it would make it easier to work with the city on concerns there.

But over the last two weeks, District 2 residents showed up in droves to speak passionately about the park and ask to keep their half. Many said it held cultural significance for the Black community on the East Side. Other residents, who have been involved in ongoing protests against cutting down trees in Brackenridge Park, said they needed more than one person controlling the fate of the historic park.

District 1 appointees ultimately voted in favor of returning the split to the park.

The vote to reverse the initial plan on Brackenridge Park handed a win to District 2 Councilman Jalen McKee-Rodriguez, who had publicly asked for his portion of the park to be returned so nearby East Side neighborhoods like Mahncke Park could have a seat at the table. megan.stringer@express-news.net