

March 26, 2026

Columbus District Elections Petition Committee for Black Columbus  
c/o Jonathan Beard  
1815 Franklin Park South  
Columbus, OH 43205

Shannon Hardin  
President  
Columbus City Council  
90 W. Broad Street  
Columbus, OH 43215

Dear Council President Hardin:

We, a group of longstanding Black community elders, leaders, and activists, write to urge you and the other members of council (copied here), to take action to secure the voting rights of Columbus's African American and other minority communities. On February 17, this group submitted language for a proposed citizen-initiated charter amendment, which we now ask the council to adopt, revise as appropriate, and put on the ballot as a council-sponsored charter amendment proposal.

We are concerned that another citizen initiative petition (*Our City, Our Say*) may violate the Voting Rights Act of 1965 by retaining the current residential districts and turning them into electoral districts. While this looked like a simple fix to them, we note that although our city is economically and racially segregated, none of those residential districts have a majority-Black electorate. Thus, adopting those boundaries for this new purpose of defining an electorate unlawfully dilutes the votes of the city's geographically-concentrated Black citizens. We submitted our proposed petition simply to pressure test the question for them of whether having a district map in a council change petition meets the single subject test – which the city attorney confirmed for us. However, given their signature gathering time crunch they went ahead without incorporating lawful electoral districts in their petition.

It is not their job as citizens to secure those federal rights for the citizens of Columbus: it is ultimately the job of our representative elected officials to do so. We ask that you fix the current broken council election system by rapidly advancing to the ballot a district-based electoral method along with an electoral map that finally (after 60 years), seeks to secure those hard-won federal rights for Black voters in Columbus.

### **Summary Background**

This issue of appropriate political representation in Columbus has deep roots, with repeated efforts to change the charter to true districts after the Voting Rights Act of 1965 was enacted, starting with Mayor Sensenbrenner's 1968 proposal through Councilmember John Rosemond's proposal in 1975 – Democrat elected officials traditionally supported true council districts, while Republicans did

not (see attached brief from the 2017 era *Columbus Coalition for Responsive Government* petition committee).

This view spread to the Democratic citizenry in Columbus over time, and began anew with a 2015 citizen-initiated charter proposal by a group named *Represent Columbus* – the first citizen-initiated charter amendment to ever make it to a Columbus ballot.

While that issue failed at the polls after a \$1.3M city coordinated negative campaign in opposition, citizens were undeterred and in 2017, a ballot issue committee named *Everyday People for Positive Change*, sought again to change the format of Columbus City Council, as the at-large system was not working for Black Columbus. That issue combined district elections with campaign finance reform, which the city attorney advised and council concurred violated the new single subject provision for citizen petitions, and while enough petition signatures were gathered to place it on the ballot, council did not vote to do so.



Figure 1: The late Congressman John Lewis won Voting Rights on the Edmund Pettus Bridge

Instead, council placed the current residential district format, which quietly preserved at-large voting, on the ballot for a vote, and it passed handily and became law.

### **Impact of Poor Council Representation on Minority Communities**

The undersigned stand ready to provide a multitude of examples of the city’s racially nonrepresentative policy blunders over the years upon the request of any member of council, but the outcome can be encapsulated in the remarks of petition committee member Tom Dillard on February 17, 2026, in the Press Release that accompanied our petition filing:

“From the year 2000 – 2020, according to a report by *One Columbus*, homeownership rates for Black families have plummeted to 33% from 40%, while rent burden has increased among Black households from 42% to 51% -- a majority of Black families now pay more than 30% of our incomes on rent – Black infant mortality is up over that 20 year period at the same time wealthy developers are taking millions of dollar in tax abatements from our city schools and a report says that “Black and Latinx workers are significantly less likely than their white counterparts to be earning at least \$15/hour—a bare minimum living wage level in the region.”

### **Voting Rights Act of 1965 Implications**

In 2017, *Everyday People for Positive Change* had engaged the NAACP Legal Defense and Educational Fund (“LDF”), our nation’s premier civil rights law firm. While the LDF had individual meetings with 42 concerned Columbus citizens and participated in an open forum at the African American Studies Extension Center with a panel of 8 and a crowd of 92 people, not a single member of council would meet with the group during any of their 3 on-site visits to Columbus (to

his credit, only former council member Michael Stinziano even expressed interest in doing so, though he ultimately cancelled his meeting request).

In an FAQ issued to Columbus in the wake of the defeat of the Issue 1 citizen referendum in August 2016, the LDF wrote:

“the Voting Rights Act forbids the use of any electoral scheme, such as the at-large method of election, that submerges the votes of people of color in elections that a white majority of voters control... although at-large voting is becoming rarer and rarer, in part due to the advocacy of LDF and other civil rights organizations, such discriminatory election systems remain in some places in our democracy.”

Continuing its written correspondence at that time, the LDF expressed its concerns that Columbus’s at-large method of electing city council members was problematic under Section 2 of the Voting Rights Act of 1965, as it relied on the selection and appointment of Black members of council to serve on council, which *Thornberg v. Gingles* had determined might be indicative of an unlawful voting method. Leah Aden, Senior Council of the LDF wrote “courts have found that appointments of minority individuals to elected positions in an at-large voting system may be indicative of impermissible vote dilution under Section 2.” In a December 19, 2017 letter to City Attorney Klein, the LDF responded to an earlier



Figure 2: Leah Aden, LDF, meeting with petition committee member Tyrone Thomas

city letter (where the city responded by saying the council has Black members), by writing “the Voting Rights Act is not primarily concerned about the racial makeup of the body at issue, but rather on minority voters’ equal opportunity to elect candidates of their choice.” And the council largely ended that 50-year appointment practice thereafter.

LDF Attorney Aden further wrote to City Attorney Zach Klein, copying all council members, on November 17, 2017, saying in part:

“...that these and other such critical decisions are made in a system where community members may not have an equal opportunity to elect their representatives of choice to the city council is alarming. Precisely because they have all too often operated as structural walls of exclusion and infringed upon the right that is “preservative of all rights,” at-large electoral systems in jurisdictions with significant populations of people of color, as in Columbus, have been struck down as violative of Section 2” [footnotes excluded].



Figure 3: The late Amelia Boynton Robinson sacrificed to win Voting Rights for our generation on the Edmund Pettus Bridge

The LDF further wrote about the city’s Charter Review Commission work:

“... the committee recently recommended maintaining the at-large voting system, although it has proposed enlarging the size of the city council to nine members and instituting a requirement that each member reside in a different ward. While **this proposed voting structure may create the perception that voters will have a representative chosen by a neighborhood community, the maintenance of the underlying at-large voting scheme for all members of the city council *will likely continue to unfailingly diminish the voices of Black voters in Columbus.*** While this issue was tabled in 2017, reportedly the council may revisit it in 2018.



Figure 4: Aden with petition committee member Tom Dillard after presenting at the Thursday Club meeting

Accordingly, we urge the city council to consider an alternative electoral method for the benefit of all of Columbus’ citizens and to ensure that the city is in compliance with Section 2 and other applicable laws. Indeed, we welcome the opportunity to work with you to resolve this important matter amicably” [footnotes omitted, emphases added].

And, in fact, despite the LDF’s clear objections, the council did present this issue to the voters for approval, and with no campaign in favor or in opposition, it passed by a wide margin: voters clearly wanted change from the old at-large system but did not understand they were voting for “fake districts” (our wording) while retaining at-large elections. As we remember, it took Emmanuel Remy’s vote in his very first council meeting after his appointment, for council to pass the ordinance to put it on the ballot for voter approval because former council member Priscilla Tyson wisely refused to do so.

A subsequent Charter Review Commission, comprised of an unlikely majority of Black appointees (a well-understood, favored Columbus tactic when disenfranchising the Black community), rubberstamped this racially discriminatory voting method, despite citizen objections both orally and in writing. This fake district scheme had been presented by the council president as a “best practice,” when it was a rarity and odd form of governance. This information was provided to the Charter Review Committee orally and in the written testimony of petition committee member Jonathan Beard, who wrote in his May 10, 2022 written testimony:



Figure 5: Leah Aden, Senior Counsel for the LDF speaks at OSU African-American Studies Extension Center forum

“The last commission said it would be informed by experts, but refused to invite the lead attorney for the NAACP Legal Defense Fund, who had volunteered to advise on the provisions of the charter that are problematic under the Voting Rights Act of 1965. Indeed, the fake districts that Shannon Hardin put on the ballot were specifically deemed problematic – again indicating the fallacy in believing that the endless appointments of Black councilmembers have been to promote Black community interests – in fact, some would argue the opposite, that they give facial cover to discriminatory policies and actions of the city. The fake districts Hardin put on the ballot are used only in Sparks and Reno, Nevada and Tucson, Arizona – none of those cities is anywhere near the size of Columbus. And in fact, at the same time the city was presenting it as a “best practice” it was being sued in federal court in Tucson, and the Nevada state legislature was reconsidering it for Sparks and Reno. It was a joke of a policy, and insulting to the electoral interests of Black Columbus. If you take your positions seriously to do right by the charter, ***I urge you to invite Leah Aden, General Counsel of the NAACP Legal Defense Fund to come testify publicly on the city’s fake districts:*** she already wrote Hardin a letter (<https://www.naacpldf.org/press-release/ldf-sends-letter-to-columbus-city-council-over-at-large-electoral-method/> also reviewed at: <https://www.naacpldf.org/press/ldfs-leah-aden-in-citylab-at-large-electoral-method-in-columbus-ohio-could-be-racially-discriminatory/> . Hear her and question her and stop relying on local partisans for election policy advice—it undermines the credibility of this commission. ***At a minimum, this Charter Commission must recommend revisiting this issue: what we have is nothing like a “best practice” – it was a political ploy by incumbent politicians – nothing citizens asked for, understand, want, or need.*** [emphases added. Please note that Ms. Aden’s letter is available now at: [Ltr. to Columbus City Council 11.6.17 \(00041260\).DOCX](#)

Beard further added in his written testimony:

“7. Similarly, the conduct of the previous Charter Review Commission leads cause to adopt a section of charter. After publicly promising the commission would do its work based on best practices informed by experts, the commission hastily chose a very weird form of council – where members have to reside in different areas of the city, but were still voted on at-large (in citywide elections). The NAACP Legal Defense Fund – which President Obama called “the nation’s premier voting rights experts” provided a written objection to this method of election – yet, the commission would not listen to its concerns about this voting method which is only used in Tucson, AZ and



Figure 6: Rev. Al Sharpton in Columbus with petition committee member Jonathan Beard, believes in the Voting Rights Act and fair district elections and pledged his support

Sparks and Reno, Nevada. At the time the charter commission was framing this as a best practice, it was being sued for possible voting rights act violations in Tucson, and the Nevada state legislature had started re-writing the Reno and Sparks charters. Clearly, the Commission Chair, Stephanie Coe, was being willingly led by the nose by city staffers and politicians who did not want the true districts issue on the ballot – in fact, at one point, one of the commissioners remarked on camera it should be called the Clark-Roberts model (after city staffers Bryan Clark and Ed Roberts who presented it). Then, after delivering nonsupport for true districts, which (true districts) are practiced in every other large American city and are a Voting Rights Act staple– so after selling out the voting rights of Columbus Black voters, Coe immediately applied to fill a vacancy on council – clearly seeking payback for her service to political interests. (And I would not be surprised if she is the endorsed candidate in the 2023 fake district elections that she helped bring into being.) The charter should be amended to ensure no volunteer on a city commission or board can be appointed to the council, or hired to the city until a year after their volunteer service has ended. Citizens should have confidence in the faithful service of those who are put on commissions and boards, and that confidence evaporates when they seek, or are rewarded, with plum opportunities. This concept is very similar to ‘revolving door’ prohibitions that are standard across the state.”

### **The Clear Failings of the Current “Fake District” Council Election System**

And, in fact, the last two election cycles (the only ones under the fake district system) have been the least competitive elections in Columbus’s 112-year charter history, with only 4 of the 9 council members having faced an opponent in their elections. Then, there was the District 7 fiasco last year that opened the eyes of the broader community to this flawed design put in place by a deeply flawed council-led charter review commission process.

The District 7 fiasco caused at least 3 groups to begin meeting about moving to the nation’s best practice since 1965: council districts. The groups which had begun independently became aware of each other and began communicating in anticipation of coming together, and members of our petition committee grew concerned with the *Our City, Our Say* group deliberations that, for simplicity’s sake, sought to maintain the current council “residential districts” but change them into electoral districts. One of the justifications given by that group was that adding district boundaries to the legislative text would both be too complicated and would violate the charter’s single subject prohibition—an objection that we thought was a preposterous misapplication of the single subject provision and that would ultimately result in a racially discriminatory citizen proposal. Thus, our group sought to “pressure test” that objection by submitting a proposal that contained a map. And our belief and analysis was confirmed: while in haste we made a drafting error (e.g., a typo



*Figure 7: The victory of Voting Rights for Black Americans coming from “Bloody Sunday” in Selma is nothing that Council should allow a citizen initiative in Columbus to reverse*

writing “2028” instead of “2027” in one place), the city attorney did indeed find that adding a map is allowable for citizen initiatives.

Unfortunately, *Our City, Our Say* was unwilling to accept the input from this petition committee, comprised of long-standing leaders in the Black community, and moved forward with their simple, yet racially discriminatory and potentially unlawful proposal. Our group of longstanding civic leaders of Black Columbus believes that the *Our City, Our Say* proposal likely violates Section 2 of the Voting Rights Act of 1965. If passed by voters, it would enshrine racially gerrymandered districts (not a single majority-Black district) in law, which given Columbus’s exclusionary past practices, would likely never be reversed in subsequent redistricting. Further, the upcoming Supreme Court decision in *Louisiana v. Callais* is likely to allow racial gerrymandering that is already evident in the current residential district maps (of no importance unless those become electoral districts). This district elections issue was brought forward by members of the Black community in 2015 to address harms the community was experiencing under the at-large voting system, yet is now being co-opted by other communities who are disregarding the legitimate voting rights concerns of Columbus’ Black community -- harms to which first brought the issue forward again in these days.

### **Columbus City Council Leadership Duty and Opportunity**

The current system is flawed and needs change, and the proposal citizens are moving forward, if passed by voters, will continue to harm Black Columbus. Thus, we call on the Columbus City Council to mitigate that potential harm and take leadership in revising the current flawed method, by voting to put true districts on the ballot in May if possible, or in November at the latest. We believe our proposal, maintaining nine council members though with each elected by district -- including the proposed council district map (please note we continue to be willing and able to provide geocoded data that the city clerk would not accept at filing), is the best practice the council president asked for years ago that the earlier Charter Review Commissions blindly ignored, and should be adopted by the council as a well-informed, inclusive, and representative proposal worthy of council – as representative of the people – to adopt and promote to the ballot and into law. We have seen the public processes designed by council (Charter Review Commissions) fail, so there can be no sincere argument of the city council that this issue or map needs a public vetting beyond the typical legislative process, prior to council voting to place it on the ballot.



Figure 8: Alex Montilla (then age 19) at Morehouse University

We believe that the council, which proposed and supported the current badly-flawed current system, has both a duty and moral obligation to propose a coherent and lawful electoral system charter amendment to the benefit of all of Columbus' citizens. We do not believe that citizens should be forced onto the streets to gather tens of thousands of petition signatures, when council can do the same, and with a simple vote of five members on any given Monday, can move an inclusive and best practice council election proposal to the ballot (and I believe we have five racial and/or ethnic minorities on the council right now -- though I suspect support for the Voting Rights Act would likely come from all nine members, with your leadership).

Shannon ... on the previous page is a picture showing a statue you likely recognize. The picture shows the nephew of petition committee member Beard, Alexander Luis Montilla, standing under the statue of the late Martin Luther King, Jr., during their visit to your college: Morehouse University. We would be surprised if you had not looked at that statue, read the inspirational words on its base, and pondered Rev. Dr. King's legacy during your tenure on campus. You likely vowed silently to yourself to continue and expand his work. Dr. King and others showed courage in their times that we should never have to replicate to gain rights for our community; now is your opportunity to continue. Rev. King's work through your position in these times.

The clear question your council will answer with its actions this month is: does Columbus City Council support the Voting Rights Act of 1965, or was the blood of our community's heroes shed in vain and is the appearance of Columbus political leaders at the MLK breakfast a shameless and embarrassing signifying sham?

Our petition committee stands ready and able to enthusiastically support elected officials who are willing to – finally -- give our geographically-concentrated Black communities the voting rights that federal law has provided, but that local business and political leaders have denied the people for the last 60 years.

These issues have been pending and in dialogue for a long time: we look forward to the council president's thoughtful review and quick response to this request on behalf of the council, ideally by April 3<sup>rd</sup>: will council commit to putting our/a true district charter proposal on the ballot by November? Further, as each council member represents the whole city under the current format and as voting is a right that is "preservative of all rights" thus a critical issue for Black Columbus, we would appreciate responses within the week from each member as to their views on this critical issue. Thank you for your anticipated support: we look forward to then supporting you in return.

Sincerely,

Denise Benning Adedugbe

Cecil Ahad

Minister Kujenga Ashe

Jonathan C. Beard

Tom Dillard

Calvin Hairston

James Jones, Jr.

Asad Shabazz

E. Tyrone Thomas, Sr.

cc: Rob Dorans  
Nicholas J. Bankston  
Lourdes Barroso de Padilla  
Nancy Day-Achauer  
Melissa Green  
Emmanuel V. Remy  
Tiara N. Ross  
Christopher L. Wyche  
Andrew J. Ginther, Mayor  
Zach Klein, City Attorney