

Race split may shift

Study finds change likely in District 6

By Mike Wynn | Staff Writer

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Six.

That's the magic number needed to give thumbs up or down on any particular matter when a vote is required on the 10-member Augusta Commission. Given the contentiousness on several recent issues that have racial overtones, signing a Mideast peace pact could prove less difficult than getting that many commissioners to agree sometimes.

The commission's tendency to split along racial lines when it comes to issues of power, such as hiring and firing and who is appointed mayor pro tem, has again fostered the image of a government gridlocked.

To many Augustans, it doesn't matter that the majority of the commission's vote is done by unanimous consent without discussion or is passed or defeated unanimously or by the majority - a 2004 survey by The Augusta Chronicle showed that 93 percent of the vote that year was done this way.

For some, commission politics has the appearance of a zero-sum game where neither side is willing to compromise, making it difficult for Augusta to move forward until one side gains power over the other. Since the mayor's ability to break ties is thwarted by commissioners' strategy of avoiding deadlocks, the only way for a political power shift to occur is for one of the districts to change demographically.

And it's going to happen, likely before the end of the decade, according to a Chronicle analysis of the eight commission districts.

Based on the rate of demographic change since reapportionment in 2002, District 6, represented by white Commissioner Andy Cheek, will have more black registered voters than whites within the next five years.

In 2002, whites made up 62 percent of the registered voters in that district, compared with 34 percent for blacks. In three years, that number had dipped seven percentage points to 55 percent in 2005. In contrast, the percentage of black registered voters had increased six points to 40 percent.

If that yearly average of a two-percentage point difference between white and black voters continues, District 6 will become majority black in 2009.

Though having a numerical advantage in registered voters doesn't necessarily guarantee that a black will be elected - last year's mayoral runoff between Deke Copenhaver and Willie Mays is a recent example - District 6 is on its way to becoming an area where the numbers will greatly favor a black candidate.

Former District 8 Commissioner Ulmer Bridges said the continuing transition of Richmond County from one that was majority white to now increasingly majority black makes the shift of political power inevitable.

"With the present direction of population, we're eventually going to have six or seven black commissioners," said Mr. Bridges, who is white. "When that happens, that'll end any racial divide if they vote along racial lines because they'll have the six votes necessary. After that nobody can speak about any race-based votes, because they'll be able to win every one."

To Marion Williams, one of the more outspoken black commission members, the impact of a majority black commission will be seen more in economic terms than any other area, such as hiring more minority contractors.

"I tell people it's not black or white, it's right or wrong with me, and I get criticized for that. But if it's right, it's still right," said the District 2 commissioner. "If you look around and see who's doing what, there's no way we can say that we've been fair in this city. Black and white businesses ought to have an opportunity to share with the taxpayers' money."

Though the racial balance on the commission isn't likely to change for several years, the political power shift could have happened sooner. And, in a sense, it did.

In 2000 and 2001, District 6, which was drawn as a majority white district, became a majority black district in terms of registered voters. When the county and city consolidated in 1995, almost 60 percent of the registered voters in the district were white. By 2000, that number had dropped to about 46 percent, and black registered voters had increased from 38 percent to nearly 49 percent.

The percentages between the two groups continued in opposite directions the next year, with black registered voters increasing by two percentage points and whites decreasing by one point.

A year later, though, the inexorable march toward a strong majority black district had been halted - and reversed, at least temporarily. The reason: reapportionment.

When the final numbers for the 2000 census were tallied, the county's population had grown by 10,000 since 1990 to nearly 200,000. Much of that growth had taken place in south Augusta, along with many inner-city residents relocating to that part of the county.

That meant several districts were either underpopulated - districts 1, 2 and 5 - or overpopulated - south Richmond County districts 6 and 8 in particular. To get the districts more in line with what was considered an ideal size of about 25,000 people each to ensure equal representation, boundary lines had to be redrawn, say those responsible for the chore in 2001.

"It was our job at that time to balance the districts," said former at-large Commissioner Bill Kuhlke, who led a racially diverse redistricting committee composed of members from the Richmond County school board and city commission. "That's basically what it was ... population-wise and race-wise depending on the makeup of the district. As far as what was adopted, it passed the smell test."

Redrawing the lines was tricky in that population could only be shifted from neighboring districts in a contiguous manner. To achieve that, said Richmond County Board of Elections Executive Director Lynn Bailey, population in heavily white District 8 was shifted north into District 6, which made that district even more overpopulated. From there, population from District 6 was shifted into districts 4 and 2, and so on.

When the final map was agreed upon at the end of 2001, white registered voters were again in the majority in District 6. The racial majorities in the remaining districts either strengthened or were little changed.

So when the 2003 municipal elections rolled around, Mr. Cheek was again ensconced in a majority white district. He won that election, running unopposed.

"I think everyone involved realized that in order to meet the requirements of the law and the fact that it was established right off that we wanted to keep eight districts, we wanted two at large like they're set up now, the incumbents wanted to remain in their districts and we didn't want to split neighborhoods, and in order to meet this criteria, there was only basically one way it could be done, and that was the one that was decided upon," Ms. Bailey said.

Maintaining the traditional demographic strength of the districts was part of the discussion during the committee deliberations. One of the requirements of the federal Voting Rights Act is that any redistricting plan must take into account its impact on minority voting strength.

Mr. Bridges, who was a member of the redistricting committee, said the black board members were interested in maintaining a large percentage of black population in their districts, which was accomplished. He said he brought up the fact that District 6 "was out of proportion and needed correcting."

"We had to maintain the integrity of that district as well," he said.

By doing so, the committee basically guaranteed that each district would continue to yield a commissioner and school board member from the dominant racial group there for the near future.

Mr. Williams, who was in his first term as a commissioner at the time, having been elected in 1999, said black commissioners were aware that District 6 had changed over but were willing to accept the plan that was submitted to the General Assembly because they believed sharing power was the right thing to do.

"We could have tried to do some things differently, but we chose not to do that," he said. "We chose just to hold it and treat everybody as fair as we can, but I'm sure they know about the shifting of the power."

"Let me tell you, black folks are the most forgiving and easy-going people in the world, I believe. They're not always right. There are some good in the worse of us, and there's some bad in the best of us. But we've been trying to be fair."

Former state Rep. Ben Allen was among the black elected officials involved in discussions on the redistricting. Others were former commissioners Lee Beard and Willie Mays, and former school board members Y.N. Myers and Johnny Hatney, who is now a city commissioner.

Mr. Allen said he would have preferred to see all the districts more racially diverse but realized that couldn't be done logistically. He said districts in which there is no dominant racial group would provide a better brand of government for Augusta.

"Ideally, I would have preferred districts that were 48-52 percent, so that everybody would have to work their tails off to get elected and they would have had to be moderates and both communities would have had to be in support of you," Mr. Allen said. "That's what I would have preferred, but because of housing patterns you couldn't do it."

"I do know that unless you have a district in which you have influence from both communities, where both communities can influence the person who's elected, if you don't have that kind of district out there, you never have the person who's elected to office growing to be a statesperson. If you don't have statespersons down there on that commission, then you're going to have stagnant growth in the community because everybody is going to be too busy being advocates for their

individual groups."

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Racial makeup of augusta commission districts

Registered voters in commission districts since consolidation:

Source: Richmond County Board of Elections; Augusta Chronicle analysis.

District 1

Year	Black	White	Other
1995	64.3%	35.1%	0.52%
1996	64.7%	34.6%	0.56%
1997	65.6%	33.3%	0.94%
1998	67%	31.8%	0.94%
1999	66.7%	32.1%	1%
2000	65.9%	32.7%	1.2%
2001	64.7%	33.9%	1.2%
2002	61.8%	36.6%	1.4%
2003	60.7%	37.7%	1.6%
2004	61.9%	35.9%	1.9%
2005	62.1%	35.5%	2.2%

District 2

Year	Black	White	Other
1995	65.6%	33.4%	.84%
1996	66.1%	32.8%	.90%
1997	67.7%	30.9%	1.2%
1998	67.8%	30.7%	1.3%
1999	67.1%	31.3%	1.3%
2000	66.8%	31.7%	1.3%
2001	66.7%	31.9%	1.1%
2002	69.2%	29.4%	1.2%
2003	70.1%	28.2%	1.4%
2004	71.4%	26.7%	1.7%
2005	71.9%	25.6%	2.4%

District 3

Year	White	Black	Other
1995	79.9%	18.4%	1.5%

1996	78.8%	19.4%	1.6%
1997	76.7%	20.8%	2.2%
1998	75.4%	22.1%	2.2%
1999	75.1%	22.5%	2.2%
2000	74.5%	23%	2.2%
2001	73.5%	24%	2.3%
2002	71.7%	25.4%	2.6%
2003	70.5%	26.4%	2.8%
2004	67.1%	29.3%	3.3%
2005	65.3%	30.2%	4%

District 4

Year	Black	White	Other
1995	72.7%	24.4%	2.8%
1996	73.6%	23.3%	2.9%
1997	75.3%	20.8%	3.5%
1998	76.8%	19.3%	3.6%
1999	78.5%	17.6%	3.6%
2000	78.6%	17.3%	3.8%
2001	80%	16.5%	3.5%
2002	80.1%	15%	4.7%
2003	81%	14%	4.6%
2004	82%	12.5%	5.1%
2005	82.5%	11.8%	5.6%

District 5

Year	Black	White	Other
1995	61%	38%	0.9%
1996	62.1%	36.7%	1%
1997	64%	34.5%	1.3%
1998	64.5%	33.8%	1.4%
1999	66%	32.3%	1.4%
2000	66.5%	31.9%	1.4%
2001	67.1%	31.3%	1.5%
2002	70.7%	26.6%	2.4%
2003	71.9%	25.3%	2.6%
2004	73.4%	23.5%	2.8%
2005	74%	22.5%	3.4%

District 6

Year	White	Black	Other
1995	59.5%	37.7%	2.6%
1996	57.5%	39.4%	3%
1997	52.7%	43%	4.1%
1998	50.4%	43.8%	4.5%
1999	47.9%	47.5%	4.4%
2000	45.9%	48.7%	4.1%
2001	44.7%	51.2%	3.8%
2002	62.2%	34.3%	3.2%
2003	60.5%	36.9%	3.3%
2004	57.2%	39%	3.5%
2005	55.5%	40.4%	4%

District 7

Year	White	Black	Other
1995	87.5%	10.5%	1.9%
1996	86.9%	10.9%	2%
1997	85.2%	11.9%	2.6%
1998	85.2%	12.1%	2.4%
1999	84.4%	12.9%	2.5%
2000	84.2%	13%	2.5%
2001	83.4%	13.8%	2.6%
2002	81%	16.3%	2.5%
2003	79.7%	17.3%	2.7%
2004	77.2%	19.3%	3.2%
2005	75.9%	20.1%	3.8%

District 8

Year	White	Black	Other
1995	82.8%	15.7%	1.4%
1996	81.8%	16.4%	1.4%
1997	79.5%	18.1%	2.1%
1998	78.1%	19.4%	2.3%
1999	76.6%	20.8%	2.4%
2000	75.3%	22%	2.5%
2001	74.5%	22.8%	2.5%
2002	73.6%	23.4%	2.8%

2003	72.5%	24.2%	3.1%
2004	69.9%	26.2%	3.6%
2005	68.7%	27.1%	4%

Super District 9 (At-large composed of districts 1, 2, 4 and 5)

Year	Black	White	Other
1995	65.8%	32.8%	1.2%
1996	66.6%	31.8%	1.3%
1997	68.1%	29.8%	1.7%
1998	69%	28.8%	1.8%
1999	70%	28.2%	1.8%
2000	69.4%	28.3%	1.9%
2001	69.5%	28.3%	1.8%
2002	69.3%	29.8%	2.4%
2003	70.8%	26.1%	2.5%
2004	72.1%	24.6%	2.8%
2005	72.6%	23.8%	3.4%

Super District 10 (At-large composed of districts 3, 6, 7 and 8)

Year	White	Black	Other
1995	79.8%	18.3%	1.8%
1996	76.2%	21.5%	2%
1997	73.9%	24%	2.7%
1998	72.2%	24.5%	2.8%
1999	70.9%	25.8%	2.8%
2000	71.9%	26.6%	2.8%
2001	69%	27.9%	2.8%
2002	72%	24.6%	2.7%
2003	70.7%	24.8%	2.9%
2004	67.8%	28.4%	3.4%
2005	66.3%	29.4%	3.9%

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