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Proposed District Map Released for Lowell Election System Change

LOWELL, MA – In an important development in the process of implementing a new election system in Lowell, the City’s voting rights expert, Dr. Nathaniel Persily, has released a proposed map dividing the City into eight election districts. Lowell residents are encouraged to view the map online at yourlowellyourvote.org and to submit comments and questions about the proposal via e-mail to yourlowellyourvote@lowellma.gov.

The proposal represents an initial draft of the map that will eventually be adopted in advance of the implementation of the City’s district and at-large “hybrid” election system, set to take effect for all municipal elections in 2021. Under the system, each of the City’s eight newly-defined districts will elect one member to the City Council, and three Councilors will be elected at-large. For School Committee elections, the eight districts will be combined into groups of two to form four districts, each of which will elect one member. Two additional School Committee members will be selected at large.

The process of changing Lowell’s election system from the existing at-large model was initiated by a lawsuit filed in May 2017 by a group of minority residents challenging the system under the Voting Rights Act. In 2019, following a series of mediation sessions, the City agreed to change its election system as a means of settling the lawsuit. In June 2019, the United States District Court signed and approved a consent decree which set forth the terms according to which the new system would be adopted. After considering several election system alternatives agreed to in the settlement, the City Council selected two “finalist” election system options that appeared on the November 2019 Municipal Election ballot. A majority of Lowell voters indicated a preference for the 8-3 district and at-large model, and the City Council subsequently voted to adopt the system.

The newly released map is drawn according to the conditions of the consent decree which requires that the eight districts contain approximately the same number of registered voters, and that two of the districts must be majority minority, where Asian-American residents and Hispanic/Latino residents together comprise a majority of the citizen voting age population. In developing the districts Dr. Persily considered a host of factors including existing census data, voter registration data, and the boundaries of historically recognized Lowell neighborhoods. The map cannot be finalized until data from the 2020 Census is available, which is expected to be in the spring of 2021.

In addition to soliciting public input via e-mail, the City intends to hold an information session on the proposed districts with Dr. Persily in December at which members of the community will be invited to learn more about the process, ask questions, and contribute their feedback.

“The City is grateful for the professionalism and expertise that Dr. Persily has contributed to the process of establishing election districts in Lowell,” said **City Solicitor Christine O’Connor**. “The release of the proposed map is a significant milestone in the implementation of the new hybrid election system. Given the consequence of this process, the City is committed to ensuring that the public is aware of what the map looks like and creating opportunities for the public to contribute their feedback prior to the map being finalized.”

Dr. Nathaniel Persily, who was hired by the City earlier this year to facilitate the districting process, is a nationally renowned expert on voting rights and elections. He has served on the faculty of Stanford Law School since 2013, teaching courses on constitutional law, the law of democracy, and the legal regulation of the political process. Dr. Persily has served as an expert in statewide districting processes in Georgia, New York and Maryland. He appears frequently as a commentator on election-related matters on major networks including PBS and NBC.

“After consultation with the plaintiffs and the City Council and review of proposals submitted through the public portal, I have developed the following eight district framework for city council elections,” said **Dr. Nathaniel Persily**. “This framework will be revised as necessary to incorporate additional public input and to adapt to the new census numbers to be released in the spring of 2021. For one-person, one-vote purposes, the plan was based on 2010 Census numbers and to ensure Voting Rights Act compliance, as directed by the court settlement that led to this districting, it is based on the most recently available five-year averages of the Citizen Voting Age Population from the U.S. Census American Community Survey.”

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