

Meet the guy who wants to change the way Minneapolis elects city council members

By [Jessica Lee](#) | 05/03/2019



MinnPost photo by Craig Lassig

Under Tom Basting's plan, each Minneapolis voter would pick five city council members — one for their particular ward and four at-large positions — instead of one under the current system.

Tom Basting hadn't given much thought to Minneapolis city politics until the summer of 2018. That's when he started going to meetings to learn about **Minneapolis 2040**, which was also around the time the policy proposal — part of the city's requirement to update its comprehensive plan every 10 years — began becoming politically contentious.

Basting's interest in the topic took hold fast. He often deals with land-use and environmental regulations in his day job as an attorney with Briggs and Morgan, one of the state's largest law firms, and he began sharing his opinion of the 2040 plan with neighbors and city staff. Of particular interest, he said, was how the plan's call for more density could impact natural resources. "You can't increase density without increasing impermeable surfaces, and that means more runoff, more pollution — all kinds of issues," he said.

Basting, age 56, thought the city needed to do more study of the issue, and he used all sorts of methods to share that opinion: he wrote letters to public officials; he shared his thoughts online; he showed up at neighborhood meetings.

Not that it mattered much in the end. In December, the City Council **finalized** Minneapolis 2040 by a **12-1 vote**, making Minneapolis the first major U.S. city to allow multifamily housing on lots everywhere and eliminate single-family zoning, a move celebrated by those who see increased density as key to the **city's housing shortage**.

But if the vote concluded the comprehensive plan process, it didn't exactly end the debate. Even before the council finalized the plan, three groups — the **Audubon Chapter of Minneapolis**, **Minnesota Citizens for the Protection of Migratory Birds** and a new nonprofit organization, **Smart Growth Minneapolis** — filed a lawsuit to try and stop the plan from being implemented, arguing that it violated the Minnesota Environmental Rights Act. Other opponents of Minneapolis 2040, meanwhile, continue to see the document's goals as a threat to neighborhood character that gives developers far too much power in shaping the city.

Basting has been part of the legal team for the Smart Growth suit, but in the wake of the 2040 plan's passage, he's also embarked on another project. Instead of sending letters and attending public meetings and submitting online commentary, he started studying the city's charter. And rather than trying to shape specific policies, he began putting his focus on something bigger: altering the very structure of the body from which ideas become reality in Minneapolis — the 13-member City Council.

'Hiding behind the ward system'

It started with a meeting. During the run-up to the council's vote on Minneapolis 2040, city planners and council members hosted public gatherings for residents to share their thoughts on the long-range plan. One of those meetings was in council President **Lisa Bender**'s Ward 10 (which includes Lowry Hill East, Whittier, South Uptown and East Harriet).

Though Basting doesn't live in Bender's ward, he decided to attend the meeting. And it was there, he said, where the council president said something that didn't feel right, at least to him: Bender told the crowd that she only wanted to hear concerns from people who live

inside her Ward 10 — and no one else — as Basting recalled.

(In an email, Bender wrote: “My staff and I review all feedback that comes through public meetings, email and phone calls but I do prioritize giving attention to the residents I directly serve at Ward 10 events,” she said.)

“I felt like they were hiding behind the ward system and saying, ‘We don’t want to hear from you; we don’t want to hear that,’” Basting said of council members. “It’s important on issues like that that the citizens have a voice and be able to voice concerns to more than just one out of the 13 council people.”

That’s when he started developing the idea for his latest effort: Revamping the City Council’s ward system, which dates back to 1872. “Given the way our system is, I wanted to think about alternatives,” he said.

Working out of his Lynnhurst home, where he’s lived since 2014, Basting said he read handbooks and statutes from other cities, learning the details of how other places — Seattle, Austin, Oakland, Boston and even Duluth — structure their councils. He also looked at examples closer to home, such as the boards governing Minneapolis’ [parks](#) and [public schools](#), which have a mix of at-large and district positions.

What he came up with is a plan that would reduce the number of city wards from which council members are elected, from 13 to nine. In lieu of those four wards seats, however, the plan calls for the addition of four new at-large positions to council, all of whom would be elected citywide. That would mean each Minneapolis voter would pick five city council members — one for their particular ward and four at-large positions — instead of one under the current system.

Basting calls it a “hybrid-ward system” and believes it would give residents “greater opportunity to voice concerns,” since five of the 13 council members would be chosen by them. The four at-large seats would also include the council president — meaning voters would get to choose leadership of the council rather than members appointing leaders themselves, which is how the system works now.

An imbalance of power?

In March, Basting submitted his proposal to the [Minneapolis Charter Commission](#), the 15-member body that oversees the city’s version of a constitution. The commission has the authority to create a ballot measure based on a citizen petition to amend the charter, and later that same month, the group set aside time in their regularly-scheduled meeting to consider Basting’s proposal. Commissioners briefly discussed the idea, gauging early interest for whether or not they should hold a public hearing on it. (At least one public hearing is required for any petition the commission is considering as a ballot question.) The board ultimately decided it needed more time, and more information, to make any decision on the matter.

Over the next several weeks, then, city staff compiled information on the [history of the council's current structure](#) and a [presentation on other municipal governments with at-large positions](#). (One nugget of information that came out of that research: Minneapolis voters were asked about restructuring the council four times between 1922 and 1930; none of the measures passed.)

By the time the charter commission convened again in April, however, word of Basting's proposal had spread — especially among those who found fault with the plan. Among the critics were members of the current city council and the city clerk, all of whom support the current system and say that restructuring would create an imbalance of power. Their argument is that since certain wards — namely wards that often have the highest concentrations of white and wealthy residents — often have higher voter turnout, and that those areas would therefore have a disproportionate say in who is chosen for the at-large seats under Basting's proposal.

In Minneapolis' last municipal election, for example, [Ward 13](#) (which covers the neighborhoods of Armatage, East Harriet, Fulton, Kenny, Linden Hills, Lynnhurst and West Calhoun) had the highest turnout in the city: more than 50 percent of eligible voters, which was more than 7.5 percent higher than the city's average. But in north Minneapolis' [Ward 5](#) (which includes Jordan, Hawthorne, Willard-Hay, Near-North, Sumner-Glenwood, Harrison and North Loop), the turnout was less than 28 percent. The difference in turnout between the two wards was similar in [last year's gubernatorial election](#), too.

“Given the outcomes produced by at-large voting in other jurisdictions, [the proposal] would mean all candidates for the four at-large seats would be induced to primarily target voters in the city's high-turnout wards — and we know that those ... wards have a higher percent of white, more affluent, higher-educated, home-owning residents,” [City Clerk Casey Carl](#) wrote in [a letter](#) to the charter commission.

Basting disagrees with that claim. “The theoretical argument that we are going to be taking people's voices away is not consistent with our experience in this city,” he said, citing the fact that people of color hold two of the three at-large commissioner seats on the Minneapolis Parks and Recreation Board and three of the four at-large seats on the Minneapolis Public Schools board. “We can always look at the model that has been and look to improve it.”

Some progressive activists in Minneapolis have also argued that the proposal is simply another effort to undermine the goals outlined in the Minneapolis 2040 plan. “They're resenting, trying to change the rules of the game,” John Skonieczny, who lives in south [Minneapolis](#)' Ward 11, said of Basting's proposal. “It would just give certain parts of the city the ability to stack the council's membership to their advantage.”

Some of those activists are also tying Basting's proposal to [a citizen-led campaign over Minneapolis 2040](#) by a group called “[Minneapolis for Everyone](#).” The group's members were mostly homeowners in south and southwest Minneapolis who argued the removal of single-family lots would fundamentally alter the look and feel of their neighborhoods, hand too much power over to developers and do nothing

to increase housing affordability. (In response to some of those concerns, city planners dialed back their original idea of allowing **fourplexes everywhere in the city under the 2040 plan to allow for triplexes** instead.)

Smart Growth Minneapolis, on whose legal team Basting serves, is a “a non-profit organization of citizens who promote environmentally responsible city planning,” but much of the group’s work has been around generating support for its lawsuit against the city, which argued that Minneapolis failed to study the environmental impacts of the plan as required under Minnesota law.

“I personally am very concerned, and I voiced this concern, about increasing density without doing an environmental review,” said Basting. “I think the city was wrong in going forward with a very, very aggressive plan. ...Why wouldn’t a progressive city like Minneapolis with progressive values ... why wouldn’t it also be interested in the environmental concerns by doing an environmental review?”

This week, Hennepin County District Court judge **Joseph R. Klein** dismissed the suit, however, ruling that state law exempts comprehensive plans from environmental review and that the plaintiffs “rely on assumptions and inferences regarding projects that may take place” under the 2040 plan.

Despite his interest and involvement in fighting Minneapolis 2040, however, Basting says his proposal to restructure the City Council is about government reform — not influencing any specific plan or policy. “The idea is really a governance issue, it’s not a results-oriented issue.”

No later than 2020

At their April meeting, the Charter Commission revisited Basting’s idea. In the end, no appointed member supported the proposal, nor made a motion to schedule a public hearing for it. So Basting is moving on to Plan B: raising support for a citizen petition.

Besides going through the charter commission, there’s another way to get a charter amendment on the ballot — by compiling enough resident signatures. **Under city rules**, a petitioner needs the signatures of support from a group that equals at least 5 percent of total votes in the most recent election. Per **2018 voting data**, that would mean support from at least 10,356 people for Basting’s plan if he finishes his campaign before November.

If that happens, the idea would go before voters in the form of a ballot measure in a city election — meaning voters would have the final say.

In recent weeks, Basting has been reviewing feedback from the charter commission and meeting with former and current commissioners. Using their input, he said he plans to begin writing the petition and reaching out to voter advocacy groups to try and

raise support.

His plan, he says, is to reach the signature quota later this year, or sometime early the next. “It remains an important issue for Minneapolis to consider,” he said. “I would fully expect this to be on the ballot no later than 2020.”

GET MINNPOST IN YOUR EMAIL INBOX:

Subscribe

You can also [learn about all our newsletter options](#).

ABOUT THE AUTHOR:



Jessica Lee

Reporter Jessica Lee focuses her reporting on covering local government issues in Minneapolis and St. Paul. She can be reached at jlee@minnpost.com, and you can follow her on twitter at [@byjlee](https://twitter.com/byjlee).

COMMENTS (9)

SUBMITTED BY PAT TERRY ON [05/03/2019 - 03:31 PM](#).

Hiding behind the ward system? Again, this is another guy upset that democracy has come to an increasingly diverse city. He wants the white homeowners to have veto power over the rest of the city.

Call this what this really is: white supremicisim.

[LOG IN TO REPLY](#)

SUBMITTED BY LISA MILLER ON [05/03/2019 - 07:14 PM](#).

But is saying some areas that have lower voter turnout need a system designed to compensate for the poor turnout any less paternalistic? If that is the issue, then put more resources into getting the vote out and making it easier to vote.

[LOG IN TO REPLY](#)

SUBMITTED BY MATTHEW STEELE ON 05/03/2019 - 03:34 PM.

I am very appreciative of WedgeLIVE's continuing coverage of this proposal, and now I'm glad to see it brought into the light by MinnPost as well. Is it really hard for people to realize they disagree with policy because they disagree with the electorate and where the electorate is heading? Elections have consequences. Don't water down that amazing reality.

[LOG IN TO REPLY](#)

SUBMITTED BY DENNIS STONE ON 05/03/2019 - 09:33 PM.

This plan is an extraordinarily cynical attempt to reclaim as much of the historical power of wealthy white homeowners as possible. I'm a [relatively] wealthy white homeowner myself, also from ward 13, and I am disgusted by this ploy. The 2040 debate opened my eyes to the incredible level of entitlement that exists down here. Wealthy white homeowners have gotten their way throughout the history of Minneapolis, and they are aghast that something has transpired that they don't agree with. On 2040 they cycled through every possible line of attack, culminating in the lawsuit supposedly based on environmental issues. But that lawsuit was obviously doomed to failure since the state constitution specifically excludes comprehensive plans from MERA requirements. And if you look at the environmental merits of the suit they are immediately revealed to be utterly specious.

The latest strategy is to try to change the council so that the highly educated wealthy white homeowners – who already vote in much higher numbers than other demographics – can be mobilized to “take back” the power from the historically marginalized groups. All in the name of defending the status quo, of relegating needed housing and especially affordable housing to any areas but theirs.

And why shouldn't council members give priority to the input of people from their wards? They WORK for those people, they represent the interests of those people. People like Basting just want to extend their dominance of the process throughout the whole city. It will be a dark day if this otherwise progressive city is waylaid by this profoundly anti-democratic effort.

[LOG IN TO REPLY](#)

SUBMITTED BY JOE MUSICH ON 05/03/2019 - 10:49 PM.

Restructuring is needed at minimal a more responsive council

LOG IN TO REPLY

SUBMITTED BY JOEL STEGNER ON 05/04/2019 - 08:06 AM.

As more people are living more of their lives single, having no or one children and want access to urban amenities and people on limited incomes struggle to find affordable housing close to transit, every part of the metro area needs to grow its multi-unit housing. They also need to restricting tear downs with replacement single family homes much larger than their neighbors.

Building needs to provide what is not easily found – affordable comfortable homes to support the preferred lifestyles of those born since the 1980s.

LOG IN TO REPLY

SUBMITTED BY ANTON SCHIEFFER ON 05/04/2019 - 09:10 AM.

It should probably be pointed out that Basting himself did not bother showing up at the April Charter Commission meeting (the second one that was held). Minneapolis City Clerk Casey Carl said during the first hearing, “Supreme Court Justice Ginsburg stated that along with racial gerrymandering... at-large elections are the primary means of diluting the power of the vote and denying equal opportunity for minority voters and candidates.”

More info on the initial proposal (including more great quotes from Casey Carl) is here:

<https://wedgeline.com/2019/03/plan-to-eliminate-city-council-seats-and-overhaul-ward-boundaries-would-empower-wealthier-whiter-south-minneapolis.html>

LOG IN TO REPLY

SUBMITTED BY BETSY LAREY ON 05/04/2019 - 09:20 AM.

We elect Congress by district and states, why not city council? Those who argue the poorer areas don't vote and should not be penalized because of this do not understand what democracy is. One city, one person, one vote. Trying to rationalize the current system is paramount to gerrymandering. If the majority of people who live in Minneapolis do not want the 2040 comp plan, then it should not be implemented. Majority rules in democratic elections. If you don't like it, elect Bernie Sanders and switch to a more socialistic form of government.

[LOG IN TO REPLY](#)

SUBMITTED BY FRANK PHELAN ON 05/04/2019 - 11:47 AM.

Hmm, maybe do something to boost turnout in minority wards?

[LOG IN TO REPLY](#)

MOST COMMENTED STORIES

Could Trump turn Minnesota red in 2020? Anything's possible, but there's little evidence to support the case (53)

Minnesota should approve driver's licenses for undocumented immigrants (43)

Trump admirer Judge Andrew Napolitano seems pretty sure Trump obstructed justice (32)

Accessory dwelling units were supposed to help ease the Twin Cities' housing crunch. How's that working out? (30)

Trump campaign chutzpah: attacking Obama over Russians' 2016 election efforts (22)

Thanks to our major sponsors

Sponsor of
D.C. Memo
and
MinnPost
Social



Sponsor of
Second
Opinion



Sponsor of
New
Americans



Sponsor of
Community
Sketchbook



Sponsor of
Economy



Powered by
WordPress.com VIP

MinnPost Staff

CEO: Andrew Wallmeyer

Editor: Andrew Putz

Managing Editor: Susan Albright

Creative Director: Corey Anderson

Director of Advertising & Sponsorship: Sally Waterman

News Editor: Tom Nehil

Project Editor: Roger Buoen

User Experience Engineer: Jonathan Stegall

Director of Development: Tanner Curl

Audience Engagement and Development Manager: Caroline Schwenz

Advertising Operations Director: Brian Perry

Director of Finance & Operations: Adrian Doerr

Advertising Coordinator: Laura Lindsay

Board Chair: Jill Field

Chair Emeritus: Lee Lynch

Co-founders: Joel & Laurie Kramer

MinnPost is a nonprofit, nonpartisan enterprise whose mission is to provide high-quality journalism for people who care about Minnesota.

Thanks to our generous donors

Mark Abeln & Monica Little

David & Debbie Andreas

Edward R. Bazinet Charitable Foundation / Maureen Bazinet Beck & Peter Beck

Wendy Bennett

Blandin Foundation

Carla Blumberg

Otto Bremer Trust

Burdick Family Fund of the Minneapolis Foundation / Allan & Lou Burdick

Bush Foundation

Central Corridor Funders Collaborative

Bill & Sharon Clapp

Sage & John Cowles

Jay & Page Cowles

David & Vicki Cox

Fran & Barb Davis

Toby & Mae Dayton

Jack & Claire Dempsey

Kelly Doran

Ethics and Excellence in Journalism Foundation

Jill & Larry Field

Peter & Mary Gove
Great River Energy
Sam Heins & Stacey Mills
Kathleen Jones
The Joyce Foundation
Tom & Marlene Kayser
Kim & Garry Kieves
John S. and James L. Knight Foundation
Joel & Laurie Kramer
Becky Lourey
Lee Lynch & Terry Saario
Martin and Brown Foundation
Jane Mauer
Bill and Amy McKinney
The McKnight Foundation
The Minneapolis Foundation
Northwest Area Foundation
Kandace Olsen & Scott Peterson
Jeremy Edes Pierotti & Kathryn Klibanoff
Susan & David Plimpton
Pohlad Family Foundation
John & Lois Rogers
Jeff Ross
The Saint Paul Foundation
John & Linda Satorius
Rebecca & Mark Shavlik
Tankenoff Families Foundation
John & Lesa Tieszen
Stephen & Jayne Usery

Donations and pledges totaling \$25,000 or more have been made by each of the families and foundations listed. For a list of all donors by category, see our most recent [Year End Report](#).

