

Presentation to the Charter Review Board
May 24, 2010

Expanding the County Commission
By Patrick Manteiga

I would like to advance to the Charter Review Board the idea that it is now time to bring the county commission closer to its constituents.

I hope after careful consideration this commission will vote to increase the number of single-member district seats to six from the current four and to keep the number of at-large, county-wide seats at three.

This would create a county commission with nine members, three county wide and six single-member districts.

County and municipal governments provide the most basic services to their constituents. This is the most local form of government and should be close to the population it serves. This level provides for our local roads and parks, establishes zoning, protects consumers, provides our water and collects our garbage. It is normally the level of government we contact most: to fill a pothole, to pick up a stray dog, to complain about an overgrown lot or to seek a variance to build a carport.

For this reason county commissioners should be close to their constituents. The relationship should be intimate, we the people need to feel we can be heard and the response is quick and adequate.

Because of Hillsborough County's growth and the limited population served by municipalities. People have become further separated from their representatives.

Hillsborough, unlike many large urban counties, has few cities—only three—Tampa, Plant City, and Temple Terrace. Cities bring government closer to the people. Your local city council person is more likely to frequent every part of his or her district than a county commissioner. It's a matter of population and geographic size served.

In 1980, just three years before the current system was put into place, the population total in the three cities was 299,738. The population of Hillsborough County was 646,960. That meant 54 percent of our population was not served by a municipality. The current population estimate of these cities is 396,282 with 1,180,784 living in the entire county. This means that 784,522 people or 67 percent live in unincorporated Hillsborough County. This group has only the county commission to go to for their needs. They deserve representatives who are closer to home and on a more personal basis.

A single-member-district county commissioner represents close to 300,000 people, which is almost as many as the mayor of Tampa, who has an estimated 340,882 constituents but city residents have a closer relationship to their government because a single-member-district city council member has on average 85,220 constituents. If we were to add two single-member-district county commissioners to the present commission, their constituency would shrink to below 200,000. A smaller population and a smaller geographic area served translate to better representation and a stronger, more knowledgeable advocate.

The size of our county-wide districts demonstrates just how large and distant our county government has grown. Jim Norman, Mark Sharpe and Kevin Beckner have a constituency larger than seven governors.

States with a smaller population than Hillsborough County

<u>State</u>	<u>Population</u>
Wyoming.....	532,668
Vermont.....	621,270
North Dakota.....	641,481
Alaska	686,293
South Dakota.....	804,194
Delaware	873,092
Rhode Island	1,050,785

That's right; Jim Norman got more votes for county commission than Sarah Palin did for governor.

In fact our at-large County Commissioners represent more people than any other county commissioners in the state.

Our commission needs to expand as our population grows or it will become more out-of-touch and harder to approach by the average citizen.

Growing the commission is a normal pattern for counties as they get larger and more urban.

Almost all small Florida counties have five at-large county-wide county commission districts but as they become larger their commissions exchange at-large seats for single-member ones or they add seats or they do both.

This helps these counties better represent their diverse populations – Urban, Suburban and Rural; white collar, blue collar and agricultural; white, black and Hispanic; and rich and poor.

These counties have outgrown the simple rule of the majority electing the majority of the county commission.

Here’s a chart of how the top 7 counties compare.

County	Population	County Commission	Pop. Per single member	Administrator
Miami-Dade	2,398,245	13 single member	184,480	Elected
Broward	1,751,234	9 single member	194,581	Appointed
Palm Beach	1,265,293	7 single member	180,756	Appointed
Hillsborough	1,180,784	3 at large/4 single	295,196	Appointed
Orange	1,072,801	6 single member	178,800	Elected
Pinellas	910,260	3 at large/4 single	227,565	Appointed
Duval	850,962	5 at large/ 14 single	60,783	Appointed
<i>Proposed Change</i>				
<i>Hillsborough</i>	<i>1,180,784</i>	<i>3 at large/6 single</i>	<i>196,797</i>	<i>Appointed?</i>

As you can see, Hillsborough has the largest constituency per elected single-member county commissioner. All the counties larger than us have abandoned at-large districts. The only county with the same county commission structure as we is Pinellas County but there is a big difference between us and Pinellas.

Pinellas has 24 municipalities covering 64 percent of its population. It only has 280,000 people living in the unincorporated county compared to 784,522 in Hillsborough. So even though Pinellas has the same setup as Hillsborough, a large majority of its population has a more immediate form of government than Hillsborough.

The current county commission structure does not promote geographic diversity on the County Commission. South Tampa has historically had a lion’s share of the commissioners and recently, when Brian Blair was on the commission, he, Jim Norman and Ken Hagan lived in the same neighborhood a few miles from each other.

Our county deserves to have representation that lives south of the Alafia River or in Brandon, or West Tampa or Town and Country or New Tampa. But, if we continue to divide the pie into four slices that geographic diversity is unlikely to become a reality. Sun City's representative shouldn't live 33 miles from that community. People deserve to have their local county commissioner live, work or shop in their area.

Dividing the county into six districts instead of the current four will open opportunities for greater racial diversity on the BOCC. The currently district lines have created district three where the African-American population is large enough for African-American politicians to have an opportunity to be elected. But in order to create this prominent Black district, Hispanic population has been divided among three districts thereby disenfranchising that population. Since this system has been in place, no one with a Hispanic surname has been elected to a county-wide county commission seat or a single member district other than Sylvia Rodriguez Kimbell. Her case was unusual in that she was an Afro-Cuban and won election to district three.

This is in spite of the fact that Hispanic population has out grown African-American to become the largest minority group in this county with an estimated 22 percent while African-American has remain fairly constant and now stands at 16 percent.

The school board was a three/four system like the county commission until recently. Also like the Commission, no one with a Hispanic surname was ever elected to that board, but the board had Black representation. As soon as the board was change to a two at large/five single-member district system, Susan Valdes, the first Hispanic board member, was elected.

With 259,772 Hispanics in the county, their absence on the commission speaks volumes on our need to foster diversity.

By dividing the county into six pieces we can create one compact and contiguous district with a 37 percent Hispanic population, which would give Hispanic candidates the base they need to get elected.

The U.S. District Court for the Middle District of Florida ruled in 2006 on Osceola County's redistricting. Claims had been made that Osceola's system was discriminatory to Hispanics. The court favored only single-member districts finding that "Hispanics in Osceola County have no reasonable opportunity to elect members in an at-large election. Therefore, given the high degree of historically polarized voting, the extra two at-large seats are completely out of reach of the Hispanic community."

Another reason to move to a system more dominated by single-member districts is

accountability. Constituents identify with their single-member county commissioner more than the at-large members. Even those who call in with problems are often asked for their address so they can be referred to their single member district county commissioner. One reason for the three/four system was that every voter could vote for a majority of the commissioners. In theory, this sounds good, but in practice, few voters know their four commissioners. It's better to identify with a locally elected commissioner and hold him or her accountable than to vote for four whom you can't remember. It's unusual in our representative democracy to vote for more than one representative for a legislative body and even rarer to vote for a majority of that body. We don't practice this in the U.S. Senate, U.S. House, State Senate or State House.

I encourage you to grow our county commission to meet the needs of our ever expanding and diversifying county.

Adopting this plan will

- Reduce the size of government
- Make government more responsive
- Create community commissioners
- Add geographic diversity to the BOCC
- Add ethnic diversity to the BOCC
- Make commissioners more accountable