

Federal Courts Left Dallas Vulnerable to Scandal

Contributed by Henry Tatum
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We were right. The federal courts were wrong. And Dallas is paying a terrible price today for the difference.

When U.S. District Judge Jerry Buchmeyer ruled the only way to bring fair minority representation to the Dallas City Council was through our present election system, he left the door open for backroom deals, tradeoffs and scandal.

Judge Buchmeyer determined that no plan could offset years of discrimination against minority City Council candidates except one that sliced Dallas up into 14 jigsaw puzzle districts with only the mayor elected citywide.

His zeal in correcting past wrongs was sincere. But the judge's tunnel vision in declining to consider any other alternatives cost Dallas the balance it needed to have an effective system for electing the council.

Dallas city officials had a plan that would have brought proper minority representation to the City Council without creating the fiefdoms that make council members so powerful in determining what will or will not be approved in their districts.

In 1989, voters approved a Dallas City Council election system that created 10 individual council districts, but added four "regional" quadrants where voters could elect a second representative for their areas.

It would have eliminated the ability of one council member to have so much control over any zoning case, business development, funding project or tax credit request in his or her district.

Unfortunately, Judge Buchmeyer rejected what Dallas voters wanted and set up the 14-1 City Council election plan in 1991 that exists today.

Dallas long enjoyed a reputation as having one of the cleanest and most effectively run municipal governments in the nation. Scandal and graft were two unknown commodities at city hall.

But in the 16 years since the federal courts ruled that there was only one way to elect a properly balanced council, one Dallas City Council member has gone to prison for extortion, another received a conviction for bribery that later was overturned and now two former council members have been indicted in the most far reaching City Hall scandal yet.

Does anyone see a pattern here?

Former Mayor Pro Tem Don Hill is accused of being involved in a complex plan that funneled money to him and associates from a developer looking for tax credits for his low income housing projects. Former City Council member James Fantroy has been indicted on charges of embezzling thousands of dollars from the Paul Quinn College community development fund. Hill's appointee to the City Plan Commission, D'Angelo Lee, is under indictment and is accused of serving as a kind of "bag man" for the former mayor pro tem.

The validity of these charges will be decided in a courtroom. But the jury already is in on the election system that has left City Hall so vulnerable.

There's a popular Mexican restaurant in Dallas with a sign on the wall that says, "If Mama's not happy, nobody's happy." You can apply the same phrase to the 14-1 single member districts plan. If the council member in your district isn't happy with your request, you aren't going to get what you want.

Council members, trying to figuring out how to get the eight votes they need for their proposals to be approved, have created a kind of tradeoff plan. "I'll vote for what you want in your district if you'll vote for what I want in mine."

The system can work if everyone is honest and only doing what they think is best for Dallas. But that is a lot to ask when there is constant lobbying of council members that now may include bribery money as well as favors.

I wish Dallas didn't have to say to the federal courts that we told you so. But there's too much evidence out there for us to say anything else.

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