

Las Cruces City Council to choose between two proposed maps for redistricting

Michael McDevitt | Las Cruces Sun-News

LAS CRUCES - City councilors reviewed four proposals during a Monday work session for redrawing council districts and agreed on two finalists to be voted on at a future meeting.

One of the finalist maps would radically alter the shapes of some council districts.

Las Cruces City Clerk Christine Rivera and Brittany Poss, director of data and analytics for Research & Polling Inc, the firm contracted by the city to help create new proposed maps, presented the council four concept maps for new council districts chosen by the city's ad hoc redistricting committee.

Poss said the firm focused on keeping areas with shared community characteristics within a single district, avoiding the dilution of minority populations' voting strength, maintaining contiguity and ensuring equitable representation of the population across each district.

Each of the six councilors present asked questions and gave their preferred picks. District 5 Councilor Becky Corran was absent. When discussion concluded, the council had agreed to decide between two finalists at a future meeting, map concepts named J and K. Concept K was the favorite of the ad hoc committee, though it radically changes the shapes of districts 1 and 4.

Redistricting is a process that takes place after each U.S. Census every ten years. In the last decade, districts 5 and 6 exploded in population when compared with the other four districts. Districts 2 and 4 grew only slightly,

while districts 1 and 3 shrunk in population slightly. As a result, District 5 and District 6 must shrink and the other districts must grow to even out representation citywide and ensure a similar number of people reside in each district.

The U.S. Census showed Las Cruces had a population of 111,385 in 2020. As a result, the ideal population for each of the six city council districts is 18,564, though Poss said a deviation of 5 percent above or below that number was permissible by state law.

District 4 Councilor Johana Bencomo expressed concern that two of the four concept maps, including finalist Concept K, reduce the number of majority-Hispanic council districts from five to four. Hispanics make up 55.6 percent of the city's adult population.

Poss said Research and Polling hadn't observed Hispanics in Las Cruces voting as a "cohesive bloc," nor had they seen white non-Hispanics in Las Cruces voting as a bloc against Hispanics, meaning the city was not at risk of running afoul of federal voting rights laws if it had one fewer majority-Hispanic district.

Bencomo said she opposed Concept K because it would give her district "an entirely new identity" and shape. She saw organizing advantages for residents of the Alameda-Depot and Mesquite historic districts from the breakup of those communities across three districts in Concept J.

District 2 Councilor Tessa Abeyta also supported Concept J because "it keeps a lot of those core areas." She also opposed one of the non-finalist maps that gave Mesilla Park to District 1 from District 2.

Mayor Pro Tempore Kasandra Gandara, who represents District 1 on the council, said one of her main concerns was keeping historic neighborhoods in the same district to the greatest extent possible.

"North Mesquite has been separated for 10 years," Gandara said. "And I hear often how difficult that is for them and the feeling of isolation because it is considered historic, and yet they're not included in a lot of the things that are happening."

District 3 Councilor Becki Graham said she preferred non-finalist Concept B, since it looked "the most familiar" to her, but that she also supported J.

"I'm one of the newest people up here ... I think that my tendency is to think a little more broadly about the entire city, and I think that's why concept maps J and B are ringing most true to me," Graham said.

Here are some highlights from the two finalist concepts.

CONCEPT J

- District 6 crosses US Highway 70 to pick up an eastern portion from District 5
- District 1 picks up the portion of District 5 west of Interstate 25
- District 1 loses the Alameda-Depot Historic District to District 4.
- District 3 crosses I-25 and picks up the portion of District 6 west of Roadrunner Parkway.

CONCEPT K

- Radically changes districts 1 and 4. District 4 would lose the Las Cruces International Airport and a lot of its current western area to District 1 and District 2
- District 4 picks up northern portions of the city west of I-25 and east of I-25 until Rinconada Boulevard, north of Sand Hill Arroyo.