

ST. MARY PARISH
HOME RULE CHARTER REVISION COMMISSION
MEETING MINUTES

APRIL 24, 2025
FRANKLIN, LOUISIANA
6:00 P.M.

The St. Mary Parish Home Rule Charter Revision Commission met on this date with the following members present: Dr. Gary Wiltz, John Higdon, Edward M. Leonard, Jr., Norbert Wanous, Betty Hicks, Kenneth Perry, Jr., John Trevino, Sr., and Barry Dufrene. Absent were Mayor Clarence Vappie, Jeremy Chesteen, and John Armato.

The Invocation was pronounced by Mr. Perry and the Pledge of Allegiance was led by Mr. Higdon.

Josh Manning, Senior Planner, and Cullen Curole, Attorney of South Central Planning & Development Commission appeared before the Commission to discuss redistricting.

Mr. Manning submitted a Council and Parish President Compensation Analysis/Comparative Salary Review and Recommendations and a Council Structure Reform Report/Conceptual Alternatives for Improving Representation and Governance to the Commission. He expounded on three (3) options for restructuring the St. Mary Parish Council to address concerns regarding majority minority representation, electoral fairness, and public accountability. He explained that Option 1 adds a fourth minority opportunity district without changing council size where it retains the existing 8 districts but replaces the 3 at large seats with 3 regional divisions and adds 1 new majority black district; Option 2 simplifies structure but does not meet proportional minority representation and eliminates the at large seats, creates 9 equally populated single member districts and provides 2 majority black districts; and Option 3 achieves the best balance of proportionality, compactness, and minority representation, though it reduces the number of seats and reduces the council size to 7 single member districts, eliminating all at large seats and providing 3 minority opportunity districts. He also stated that public input needs to be involved.

In response to Dr. Wiltz's inquiry, Mr. Manning expounded on the black, white, and minority Voting Age Population percentages in Districts 9, 10, and 11 based on the 2020 Census.

In response to several Commission Members's inquiries, Mr. Manning expounded on the importance of public input, importance of district size, affect it will have on service district, pre clearance, and expounded on each of the three (3) options regarding their differences, having all single districts, single districts and at large districts, decreasing the number of districts, percentage of minorities in each district, adding an additional majority minority district, and increasing minority representation and influence on the Council. Mr. Manning informed that St. Mary Parish and St. Charles Parish are the only parishes that have At Large Districts. He also expounded on the best time frame to do the redistricting if it is needed and whether the data has changed since the 2020 Census.

In response to Judge Leonard's inquiry, Mr. Manning stated that it would be hard to obtain the needed minority percentage to create 7 Single Member Districts and 2 At Large Districts based on population across the parish. Judge Leonard stated that there is an advantage of having At Large Districts and stated it would be interesting to see on paper.

After lengthy discussion, Mr. Trevino expounded on At Large Districts. However, he stated that he is in favor of 7 single member districts.

Mr. Dufrene discussed minority representation, adjusting the amount of pay for Council Members, and stated that he is in favor of 7 single member districts.

Patrick Hebert, St. Mary Parish Council Member for District No. 6, stated that the most simplified way is to keep 8 single member districts because the demographics are already in place. He stated that redrawing lines is a lot of work. He also expounded on 7, 9, and 11 single member districts and it's reference to creating a third minority district.

Lee Dragna, Morgan City Mayor, stated that he is in favor of 7 single member districts and no at large districts. He also stated that his opinion is that if the Parish President is a full time position and has

power to operate the Parish like the Chief Administrative Officer, that he should also run the Council Meetings like the mayors do because he is the only one that is voted by all voters of the Parish. Therefore, eliminating a chairperson.

J Ina, St. Mary Parish Council Member for District No. 2, expounded on momentum and stated that he is in favor of 8 single member districts that would replace the 3 at large districts with 3 regional divisions that have the “vote where you live” perspective.

Rodney Olander, St. Mary Parish Council Member for District No. 3, stated that he is in favor of 8 single member districts because the district lines are already in place and do not have to be redrawn. He stated that it may be a good idea for the Parish President to run the Council meetings.

Rev. Craig Mathews, St. Mary Parish Council Member for District No. 1, stated that the Charter does not represent our current economy and his opinion is that the Parish President should not be chairing the Council meetings.

OLD BUSINESS:

- A. Discussion and action relative to Article II. Parish Council, Section 2-01 through 2-18 of the current SMP Home Rule Charter.

Judge Leonard suggested adding an additional Charter recommendation saying the Charter must follow State Law.

After discussion, Judge Leonard moved to defer action on the size of Council and their compensation to the next meeting. Mr. Dufrene seconded the motion, which carried. Mr. Perry was absent.

Mr. Dufrene clarified the most current salary totals for the Assessor, Clerk of the Court, and Sheriff that were submitted by South Central Planning & Development Commission. Mr. Manning stated that he obtained those totals from their websites.

After discussion, Lisa Morgan reminded the Commission that they already voted that the Parish President’s salary be an average of the Assessor, Clerk of the Court, and Sheriff’s salaries.

Discussion was had relative to having the District Attorney’s Legal Counsel prepare the final documents to be presented to be placed on the election ballot that will go before the vote of the people.

Legal Counsel, Morgan Guillory Bodin stated that it has never been the responsibility of the District Attorney to prepare the documents and set the election. She reminded the Commission that Legal Counsel, Eric Duplantis informed them of this at their first meeting and also reminded them that they requested several entities appear before the Commission to present services they offer. She also stated that South Central Planning & Development Commission was the only one that appeared and explained their services. She further reminded the Commission that they would present recommendations to the Council, who have the responsibility to place the items on the ballot.

Patrick Hebert stated that the final document needs to be prepared by someone with legal representation. He also expounded on the cost of the election.

In response to Mrs. Hicks’ inquiry, Mr. Manning stated that the services are offered free of charge to the Commission to prepare the final documents for election.

After discussion, Dr. Wiltz moved to engage South Central Planning & Development Commission to prepare and submit the final documents to present to the Council to place on the ballot for the election. Mr. Perry seconded the motion, which carried.

In response to Mr. Dufrene’s inquiry relative to the Commission’s deadline for duration, Lisa Morgan read Ordinance No. 2371, specifically Section 3 that states “a duration of 9 months, but no longer than 12 months” and Section 4B states “the Commission shall have the authority to use the facilities and services of the parish or any political subdivision necessary to carry out its mission of preparing and submitting an amended home rule charter or alternative proposals.” She also read Section 6b, “The proposed amended charter, and any alternative proposals, shall be submitted by the Council to the qualified electors of the Parish for their adoption or rejection per applicable state law, not later than 12

months following submission of said proposal amended charter, and any alternative proposals by the commission to the Council per LA R.S. 18:1285.”

After lengthy discussion, Judge Leonard moved to accept Article II of the Home Rule Charter with the exception of the items that were deferred, Section 2-05 – Compensation and the size and make up of the Council, as discussed in the appendix of the Home Rule Charter. Dr. Wiltz seconded the motion, which carried.

NEW BUSINESS:

- A. Discussion and action relative to appointing members (Norbert Wanous and John Trevino) to begin the reviewing process of Articles VI, VII, and VIII of the St. Mary Parish Home Rule Charter.

Mr. Dufrene moved to appoint Mr. Wanous and Mr. Trevino to begin the reviewing process of Articles VI, VII, and VIII of the St. Mary Parish Home Rule Charter for the next meeting. Mr. Perry seconded the motion, which carried.

Discussion was had relative to the Commission needing more time to complete their review of the Home Rule Charter and possibly meeting twice per month.

After lengthy discussion, Dr. Wiltz moved that the Parish Council’s Chairperson put an agenda item on the next agenda stating that the Home Rule Charter Revision Commission requests an extension of 6 months to complete review of the Home Rule Charter and to mirror State Statue LA RS 33; 1395.1. Mr. Perry seconded the motion, which carried.

Discussion was had that the next Home Rule Charter Revision Commission meeting be held on May 15, 2025 at 6:00 p.m.

There being no further business, Judge Leonard moved for adjournment. Mrs. Hicks seconded the motion, which carried.

Kenneth Perry, Jr., Secretary

Betty Hicks, Chairperson