

House Government and Veterans Affairs Committee
January 30, 2025
HB 1297 – Testimony in Opposition

Chairman Schauer and members of the House Government and Veterans Affairs Committee, my name is Denise Kolpack and I am honored to serve as a Fargo City Commissioner since July 2022 and Deputy Mayor since July 2024.

In 2018, following 18 months of work by a citizens' task force to study a variety of election issues, citizens of Fargo initiated a measure to consider changing city elections to implement an approval voting process. The measure passed in the 2018 General Election, where more than 47,000 voters passed the measure with 64% approving. The process has not been used in the last three elections.

Having read past testimony and a summation of the work of the task force, I know that one of the issues they were trying to solve for was the trend of having small percentages of voters – 15% - 20% - electing at large city commissioners. I can tell you in my election, we had 15 candidates for two seats, and as the first-place vote getter in my election, I won with 43%.

I also believe approval voting is very intuitive, and encourages more citizen engagement. In fact, when I decided to run for city commission in 2022, I leveraged approval voting as part of my campaign strategy. Basically, I asked voters and different constituencies, that if they heard or learned something about me that resonated with them, or supported, in this non-partisan office, to add me to their list of votes as a qualified candidate.

I have also had feedback that the approval voting process has been more favorable to one party over another. I can assure you that the current make-up of the Fargo City commission, again a non-partisan office, has had very vocal political preferences as expressed by Commissioners themselves, across the entire political spectrum – including mine of remaining independently non-partisan.

Finally, I have also heard that some concern may be the lack of consistency in election processes. Across North Dakota there are many variations today from city to town – including candidates who are at-large as in Fargo, those coming from Wards, and combinations in-between.

I respectfully ask you, the members of this Committee, for a DO NOT PASS recommendation on House Bill 1297. Thank you for this opportunity.

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