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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

November 20, 2019

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Lowell City Council Selects District & At-Large Election System (“Hybrid” System)

LOWELL – In an 8-0 vote on Tuesday the Lowell City Council selected a district and at-large “hybrid” system for electing City Councilors and School Committee Members. Under this system, the City Council will be expanded from nine to eleven members. The City will be divided into eight districts, with each district electing one member to the Council. Three City Councilors will be elected at-large. For School Committee elections, there will be four districts (the eight districts would be combined into groups of two) with each district election one member, and two at-large seats.

Currently, members of Lowell’s City Council and School Committee are each elected at-large. The decision to change this system was prompted by a May 2017 lawsuit challenging it under the Voting Rights Act. After a series of mediation sessions with plaintiffs in the lawsuit, the City agreed to change its election system. Four potential new options intended to increase the opportunity for minority groups to elect their preferred candidates were agreed to in a consent decree settlement.

In September, those options were narrowed to two “finalists” options by the City Council; a ranked-choice voting option and the “hybrid” option. Lowell voters were able to express their preference between the two systems through non-binding questions that appeared on the November 5th Municipal Election Ballot. The results of these questions reflected a preference among voters for the “hybrid” option.

The new system is anticipated to go into effect ahead of Lowell’s 2021 Municipal Election. An independent expert will be contracted to draw district lines, which must take into consideration traditional boundaries, including neighborhoods. The eight districts must be roughly proportional in population size and regularly shaped. The consent decree requires that two of the eight districts must be “majority-minority.” The exact drawing of districts will not be finalized until 2020 census data, which will be taken into account in their development, becomes available.

In a vote earlier this year, the City Council passed a motion establishing a one year residency requirement to be eligible to seek a district seat. Any additional conditions of the new system will be developed in consultation with election experts and plaintiffs in the lawsuit in the coming months.

Following the Council's selection, the City will be required to seek ratification of the new system from the state legislature through a home-rule petition.

"This vote marks the culmination of a remarkably transparent and productive process to restructure our election system in a way that will allow our City Council and School Committee to better serve our community," **said Mayor William Samaras.** "Given the magnitude of this decision, it was critical to engage the whole community in the process and provide opportunities for public input. I am pleased by the success that we had in this task, and I am confident that our new election system will be successful in making Lowell's government more reflective of our diverse community."

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