

Alachua County commissioners listen to a presentation. [The Gainesville Sun, File]

By Ward Scott/Special to The Sun

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In a [Sun article](#) published Jan. 4, Alachua County Charter Review Commission Vice Chairman Joe Little said the group can almost always count on hearing many suggestions from residents arguing for the county to switch from at-large elected commissioners to single-member districts.

Do the applicants and those accepted suggest why?

Of the 33 Alachua County residents who put their names in the hat, 24 listed Gainesville as their residences. Three claimed Newberry, one each High Springs, the city of Alachua, Micanopy, Waldo and curiously one from Williston. Another, in a sketchy application, listed only a post office box, no city.

You guessed it: Of the 12 selected, nine identify with Gainesville, the other three with the city of Alachua, Micanopy and one the mysterious post office box.

You might say, so what?

While not rising to the level of a Charter Review proposal, an example of a basic difference between the rural and the urban helps elucidate the divide.

The Alachua County Commission meetings are broadcast on cable. But until reminded by rural residents that cable was essentially unavailable in rural areas of the county, rural residents couldn't watch their own commission in action.

Even though the county thought they fixed the problem by streaming the commission meetings on the internet, a significant number of rural residents are served solely by satellite television because cable is largely unavailable in the countryside. This disparity had not occurred to the commission.

Do more representative membership models already exist on other county advisory committees?

The Alachua County website lists 17 advisory boards. The Affordable Housing Advisory Committee, for example, solicits applicants from various occupations: banking, low-income and home building representatives, to name a few.

Wild Spaces and Public Spaces requires a representative from the incorporated cities, the city of Gainesville and the county.

And the Rural Concerns Committee categorizes applicants in several different categories:

- Two residents from the unincorporated area outside urban clusters designated in the Alachua County Comprehensive Plan
- A Farm Bureau Member, an IFAS representative
- Two at-large members
- Three active in agriculture or silviculture
- And one from the Agricultural Extension Office

According to the Florida Association of Counties website, 20 Florida counties have charters. Not all have review commissions that meet every 10 years. Some meet more frequently.

Some stipulate a diversity of demographics in their criteria for participation. Therefore, without belaboring the point, the Alachua County Charter Review Commission could be set up so that the membership would not be Gainesville-centric.

Or the Alachua County Commission could place the proposal on the ballot themselves.

Or the citizens could use the citizen initiative process, a difficult and time-consuming task.

But the intended method for the public to make the proposal is to the Charter Review Commission. However, the Charter Review Commission would have to agree in a majority decision to order the Alachua County Commission to place the issue on the ballot so the people could decide.

And, if passed, the change in membership wouldn't take effect for 10 years.

Ward Scott is chair of the Alachua County Rural Concerns Advisory Committee.