

Pie-shaped wards merit consideration
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I like pie. Apple pie, cherry pie, the number pi, what Fred Flintstone called "pizza pie." Not so much the *Life of Pi*, which I found overwritten, but most pies? I'm a fan.

I'm particularly a fan of pie-shaped electoral districts, in which one district contains both outer suburban neighbourhoods (the wide side of the pie wedge) and inner-city communities (the point).

More to the point, although actual pie-shaped districts can be unworkable and politically unsaleable, the idea of including inner and outer neighbourhoods in the same ward has a lot of merit.

Calgary city council will adjust the boundaries of the civic wards. This can be a relatively uncomplicated affair -- the city clerk's office draws some lines on a map, keeping the wards close to one another in population, a few amendments are made, and the new map comes into place at the next election.

Indeed, the first proposal that council saw last week had too many changes for the aldermen to be comfortable, and, at this writing, it seemed they would accept a plan with the minimum possible changes. In so doing, they are making a mistake.

This time around, though, council would have been well-served by stepping back and looking at the big picture. The decision to set ward boundaries is one of the most important council can make, and this decision deserves to have a full public discussion before being implemented.

While it is not correct to get into gerrymandering, of course, it is important to note that the boundaries can impact decision-making and the future of the city.

When I ran in Ward 3, it was a huge pain. That ward has three major population centres: gentrifying inner-city neighbourhoods, established middle-class communities and new communities on the outskirts.

While this made campaigning difficult, it also ensured that I had to think about the needs of a diverse group of citizens. Even though I'm not planning on running again, the fact that I needed to sympathize with all three groups was enormously useful in refining my view of what makes a city work.

Our current ward boundaries make this difficult for all aldermen. All but three wards touch the city limits now, and seven -- half of the total -- contain many new and yet-to-be-built suburbs. Little wonder, then, that issues of deep concern to the central city -- to us all -- sometimes seem to get short shrift.

This is not to say suburban aldermen can't work for the betterment of the downtown, or that inner-city aldermen don't give a whit about the suburbs. There are many examples of co-operation and mutual understanding.

However, this council has a real opportunity to think hard about how the ward system can better serve Calgarians.

Maybe the pie-shaped districts are the answer. A more politically saleable solution might be to make each district a bit more like Ward 3 -- maintain much of the existing boundaries, but snake the suburban wards in a bit to capture some inner city, and the inner-city ones out a bit to capture some suburbs.

The possibilities are endless; we need to unleash the creativity needed to explore them.

The imagineCalgary process, empowered by this council to create a long-term vision for the city, has identified electoral reform as a major concern going forward.

By opening up the ward boundary-setting process, aldermen can show their commitment to making imagineCalgary real.

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