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Councilors decide upon new districts

By JAMES BEATY

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Most of the McAlester City Council agreed on several things during the councilors' regular Tuesday night meeting at City Hall, where they considered accepting the new ward boundaries for the city.

They didn't particularly like the new boundaries for one thing — primarily because of the inclusion of the city's prison population when redrawing the new lines, based on the findings of the 2010 Census.

However, several councilors as well as Mayor Kevin Priddle agreed that the city's ward redistricting committee had done an outstanding job.

Ward Commission Chairman Evans McBride indicated the members of the commission didn't particularly like the way the new boundaries were redrawn either — but he said they had to include the prison population when redrawing the boundaries because of requirements in the new City Charter.

"We understand and share those concerns," McBride said.

Following a long discussion, five of the councilors and the mayor voted to accept the commission's plan, while Ward 4 Councilor Robert Karr — whose Ward currently includes Oklahoma State Penitentiary and the Jackie Brannon Correctional Center — cast the lone vote against it.

Joining Mayor Priddle in voting to accept the ward commission's plan were Ward 1 Councilor Weldon Smith, Ward 2 Councilor Steve Harrison, Ward 3 Councilor John Browne, Ward 5 Councilor Buddy Garvin and Ward 6 Councilor Sam Mason.

City councilors met in regular session in the Council Chambers at City Hall.

During a discussion with City Attorney Joe Ervin, city councilors pondered the possibility of asking voters to approve a change in the City Charter, which would either not count the prison population for redistricting purposes, or else divide the

population equally among the six wards.

However, they ultimately decided there would not be enough time to do so before the filing period begins in January for the municipal elections set for next March.

Offices up for election in March 2011 include the mayor's post, as well as the city council seats in Wards 1, 3 and 5.

Ervin noted that the new City Charter — approved

since the previous redistricting based on the 2000 Census — stated that the redistricting would be based on population within the city.

"Our city charter doesn't speak to citizens," he said. "It doesn't speak to voters."

During the meeting, Ward 4 Councilor Karr discussed a letter he said he received Tuesday from Peter Wagner, executive director of the Massachusetts-based Prison Policy Initiative.

Wagner advised that the city could consider a change in its city charter,

so that the prison population would not have to be counted in one ward for redistricting purposes.

In the end, while the council discussed the possibility of asking the voters to change the charter, they took no vote Tuesday night to expedite that process.

However, the council left the door open to discuss the possibility of revamping parts of the charter for voter consideration in the future.

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