

Raynell Cooper
San Francisco, CA 94117

May 11th, 2022

Re: Redistricting Task Force Final Report Member Statement

Dear San Francisco,

When contemplating this opportunity to immortalize my thoughts regarding my service on the San Francisco Redistricting Task Force, I was reminded of another Task Force: The Human Interference Task Force. This was an interdisciplinary group of Cold War scientists, linguists, and philosophers tasked with finding a way to communicate the presence of nuclear waste to humans ten millennia from now who would still be negatively affected by the radiation but will likely not be able to understand any of our written languages. Proposals ranged from glowing cats to giant spikes in the ground to Thomas Sebeok's proposal of an "atomic priesthood," a pseudo-religious order that would be able to carry information across hundreds of generations.

While the stakes are much lower and the time period is much shorter, the message of the Human Interference Task Force to far-future archaeologists and my message to like-minded potential Redistricting Task Force members is the same: Stay Away.

I applied to and was appointed to this Task Force at age 26, looking for a way to get more involved in making San Francisco better without getting too deep into the City's notoriously toxic political climate. I worked (and still work) as a planner for SFMTA, so I felt like my energy would be best spent on this nonpartisan and ostensibly nonpolitical body, where I could contribute my community engagement skills and lifelong passion for maps without having to ruffle too many feathers.

I approached this process the same way I approach everything in my career in the public sector: attempting to do what's best for the people while working within difficult and oftentimes frustrating constraints. My understanding of the task at hand was that we were to take in data and public feedback and discuss how to make the best possible map based on those inputs, without consideration for the desires of political interests unwilling to speak publicly about what their intentions are and why.

But it became clear to me in the final days of the process that I had brought a clipboard to a knife fight. The delays in the mapping, the back-and-forth votes we took as a body, and blatant attempts, some successful, by outside political actors to influence the map led to a pressure cooker of a week ahead of the original mapping deadline of April 9th. We had put off the difficult conversations around this map to the final week, and with those difficult conversations came voluminous public comment, which meant marathon meetings that drained all of us, physically and emotionally.

The primary illustrative example of what went wrong that week was the question of Potrero Hill and the Portola, two neighborhoods about which we heard overwhelming support for their inclusion in District 10. The cases to move Portola into the same district as Visitacion Valley and to keep Potrero Hill with Sunnydale, the Bayview, and Hunters Point were both quite strong, but unfortunately there was not a situation where both could fit in the district. This led to a series of honest but difficult conversations and far too many difficult votes.

On April 4th, we moved away from a Potrero-Hill-in-D10 map after reaching an impasse regarding South of Market and Tenderloin. We then on April 6th voted to move Potrero Hill into D10. Then on April 9th, what seemed like a settled matter resurfaced out of nowhere with a new motion to move Potrero Hill out of District 10 springing out of a convoluted series of edits as if it were just an organic set of edits necessary to balance the numbers. That motion would have put Potrero Hill in District 9, a new home for the neighborhood that to that point had not been contemplated. It failed, but after a hastily called recess the vote was reversed and Potrero Hill was off to District 9 and the Portola added back District 10.

Regardless of the merits of the move itself, blatant unfairness of the proceedings led to myself and three other members walking out of the meeting. It had become apparent to me earlier that day that not all members of the Task Force were voting based solely on how their own hearts or minds felt about the issues at hand and in that moment it became apparent to everyone else. The issue of Potrero Hill and the Portola was brought back to assuage outside political interests, not due to any genuine change of heart by a member of the Task Force. I was stunned by what I had just witnessed and knew that I would be compromising my morals by remaining in that meeting that evening. You can hear it in my voice during the recording of that meeting – I cease being able to form words to discuss the map and what I am even looking at. The move of Potrero Hill out of District 10 was once again undone in a meeting after the original mapping deadline, but not before the damage was done to the public's trust in the process and my own personal trust in the process.

The issue of whether to include the Portola or Potrero Hill into District 10 brought about vitriolic racist language on both sides, the likes of which I had never seen in-person and hope to never see again. While the conflict itself was largely unavoidable and will certainly be a central theme for this process next decade, the flames of hate were fanned by our poor behavior. The way the Task Force handled itself with the public regarding the Potrero Hill and Portola issue was an embarrassment.

During the recess immediately preceding the walkout, I thought about the events that had transpired thus far and the dark truths I had learned about the political system of San Francisco while pacing deliriously around the 4th floor of City Hall. I leaned on the stone barrier separating the hallway from the grand stairway below and the Baroque dome above. These early-morning recesses were among the only times I had seen the rotunda without happy brides and grooms celebrating weddings. People come to City Hall to get married not just

because it's cheaper than other options or because it's an exemplary specimen of Beaux-Arts architecture. It's because it stands for something. Weddings in City Hall are imbued with the strength of our democratic institutions and the power of the oaths its public officials make. As someone who is defined by my civic pride and faith in the sanctity of local government, there was always something beautiful about that to me. But in that moment, none of it felt right. In that moment, this building that should be a temple to the very best aspects of human society wasn't anything more than a Vegas drive-thru chapel.

My reasons for voting against the map were two-fold. For one, I resented that political influence clearly had a direct effect on the voting patterns of some of my colleagues. I won't pretend to know the full extent of what went on behind the scenes that led to the shape of the map we'll be living with for the next decade, but I know that the map was not as above the political fray as it should have been. But additionally, we did not, in my eyes, meet the City Charter's requirement to "make adjustments as appropriate based on public input at public hearings." This is a frustratingly vague turn of phrase within which just about any alteration to this map can be justified. As I interpret it though, the central decision of this map, removing Tenderloin from its cross-Market neighbors in Central SOMA and moving it to District 5, is not an appropriate adjustment based on public input.

We heard virtually unanimous opinion from the residents of Tenderloin, Central SOMA, and District 5 that the previous alignment of those neighborhoods made sense. The Tenderloin community in particular was consistent, persistent, and clear about their desire to remain in the same district as SOMA. But going against near-unanimous public comment is not in and of itself a sin. Thanks to the uneven growth in San Francisco that stems in part from its racist system of exclusionary zoning, the scale of change this redistricting process required was massive and meant that we were always going to have to make changes that some people did not like and maybe even changes that faced universal opposition. District 6 in particular was going to have to change massively, and moving the Tenderloin was certainly one way to exact that change. That is where the word "appropriate" comes in.

Keeping neighborhoods whole is an essential part of this process, but not every community can stay together. Hard choices needed to be made. So where to begin when trying to balance those tradeoffs? For me, the answer was obvious: start with the part of San Francisco that relied the most on City services and is the most in need of attention from its Board of Supervisors representation. That is the Tenderloin and its partner Central SOMA. Keeping those neighborhoods together made for some unpopular changes to other parts of the map, but moving the East Cut to District 3 and Russian Hill to District 2 were reasonable changes to make to accommodate that. Keeping the SROs together, ensuring affordable housing residents

were well-represented, allowing for public safety and public health issues in these central city neighborhoods to be handled holistically by one Supervisor – these are higher priorities than keeping the Transbay Terminal with Mission Bay or Russian Hill with Telegraph Hill. Government exists to serve everyone, but these underprivileged communities need a leg up and need to be centered in this process.

It was profoundly disappointing to see the majority of my colleagues make a decision that explicitly prioritized the desires of well-off communities over the needs of the most underprivileged. It speaks to a callous and uncompassionate way of seeing society and our role in it that I did not think could have permeated the membership of the Task Force. But more than that, it was just baffling for the map to head in the direction it did time and time again. It was a decision that was not at all in conversation with the community input we received and one that was not at all adequately justified to the public. Only in the final moments of the process were explanations offered up by anyone besides the Chair as to why they felt like the move of the Tenderloin into District 5 was the best solution to our problem. Those explanations may satisfy some members of the public but did not rise to the level I believe the public deserved.

In the weeks since the map's passing, I have already heard stories of the difficulties created by the separation of Tenderloin and Central SOMA are strong communities. It was a completely avoidable deep cut through the heart of a community that could handle it the least. I do hope that the divisions this map has sown in this City become a call to action for neighborhoods to reach across Supervisor district lines for their advocacy and community-building.

I learned a lot about the City & County, I learned a lot about myself, and I'm very proud of my service on the Redistricting Task Force. But I cannot deny that this was an immensely dispiriting process. As someone who wakes up every day trying to do right by the people of San Francisco, this peek behind the curtain made me question, at least for a moment, whether those in power were even thinking about that at all. Perhaps I was naïve to think that my colleagues and much of the public would be on the same page with regards to the sanctity of the process. Perhaps I should have been prepared for politicians to apply pressure and for Task Force members to vote in response to that pressure. But the truth is I shouldn't have needed to be prepared. We owed it to the City and County of San Francisco to run a process they could have faith in regardless of the outcome and we failed at doing that.

I want to take a moment to thank the staff of the Clerk's office, especially our main clerk, Mr. John Carroll. John Carroll could have – and likely should have – left us out to dry at any point in this process. From the difficulties of scheduling during an ever-changing pandemic to the

back-to-back marathon meetings to dealing with the motley crew that was the Task Force, he was a paragon of professionalism and represented the very best of what San Francisco government has to offer. Through unbelievably difficult circumstances he managed to set an incredibly high bar that those of us who work for the City & County. I also want to thank those from the Office of Civic Engagement and Immigrant Affairs who helped translate the bulk of our meetings, the City Hall and elections staff who supported our in-person meetings, and everyone else behind the scenes who did their best to try to make this process work.

After this month, I imagine this letter is going to go largely unread for nine years, like an entry in the world's least interesting time capsule. Should this process happen again in the early 2030s under the same rules, I know the staff will once again answer the call to serve by acting honestly and professionally. I also know the public will once again organize and fight for what they think is best for this community. I wish I could say with certainty that next decade's Task Force will be able to rise to the occasion.

While the recommendations contained within this report, if followed, are a starting point in rebuilding trust in the process and trust in the City, it is up to all nine members of the next Task Force to hold themselves accountable to the Charter and to the people and to not let outside forces who only have their political interest in mind influence what the districts look like. Unfortunately, there would need to be major changes to the Task Force selection process, Charter requirements, and the fundamental decorum of politics in this City for redistricting to ever occur in a manner where the deck is not stacked against the voices of the public and members who wish to faithfully listen to those voices and create a map that is best for the City. I wish I could in good faith advise civic-minded bureaucrats to get involved in redistricting. On paper, it should be exactly the thing someone like me would enjoy and excel at. But as it is, I have no choice but to do everything in my power to make sure they do not get caught up in this quagmire and leave it to people better-suited to dealing with the proverbial radioactive waste that I'm all but certain will continue to irradiate this process for decades to come.

Best,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Raynell Cooper". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a large initial "R" and a long, sweeping underline.

Raynell Cooper