

# Decatur's south district elects first black city commissioner

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## Decatur's south district elects first black city commissioner

By John Vardeman  
Staff Writer

Elizabeth Wilson, a health center administrator, was elected the first black city commissioner in the 161-year history of Decatur Wednesday, receiving 44 percent of the vote among a field of one white and five black candidates.

Inside the tiny reception area of the Decatur City Hall Wednesday evening, a squeezed-in crowd of mostly black supporters of Ms. Wilson shrieked and hugged each other as the final election results were posted.

Ms. Wilson, tears rimming her eyes, told reporters she was "very, very happy" to have made history in Decatur. "And I know the black people in the city are very proud at this moment."

Ms. Wilson's victory in the election, the first test of the city's new district voting system, will also double the number of women on the five-member commission. In taking office in January, she will become the second woman commissioner, joining incumbent Marian Cunningham.

Black candidate Louise Thrower ran a distant second in the crowded southern district race, finishing with 122 votes to Ms. Wilson's 277. Under the Decatur election system, the candidate with the most votes wins without a runoff.

Charles Hiott, a banker and the only white candidate, received 115

votes; Michael Harris got 63 votes; Richard Mahone, 37 votes; and Sidney Holston, 16 votes. Approximately 17 percent of the registered voters in the district turned out for the election.

Prior to the abolition of citywide voting in Decatur this year, many black residents felt a black could not be elected there, despite its 42 percent black population.

Three of the black candidates in Wednesday's race — Ms. Thrower, Holston and Mahone — had lost local election bids in past years.

But Ms. Wilson, a 53-year-old first-time political candidate, believes she still could have won election under the former at-large system.

"The formation of district voting in Decatur did not make up my mind to seek office," Ms. Wilson said. "I had planned to run all along."

Nevertheless, Ms. Wilson strongly supports the city's district voting system, which she had a hand in creating through her work on a citizens' advisory panel. "I think district voting will make it easier for blacks to win election in the city," she said.

During her door-to-door campaigning, Ms. Wilson said she became aware that both white and black residents wanted a black representative on the city commission.

Although the city's southern district is 70 percent black, Ms. Wilson still had

to collect a large number of white votes, because only 48 percent of the registered voters in the district are black, according to city records. In the 73 percent-white Winnona precinct, Ms. Wilson still outpolled the white candidate.

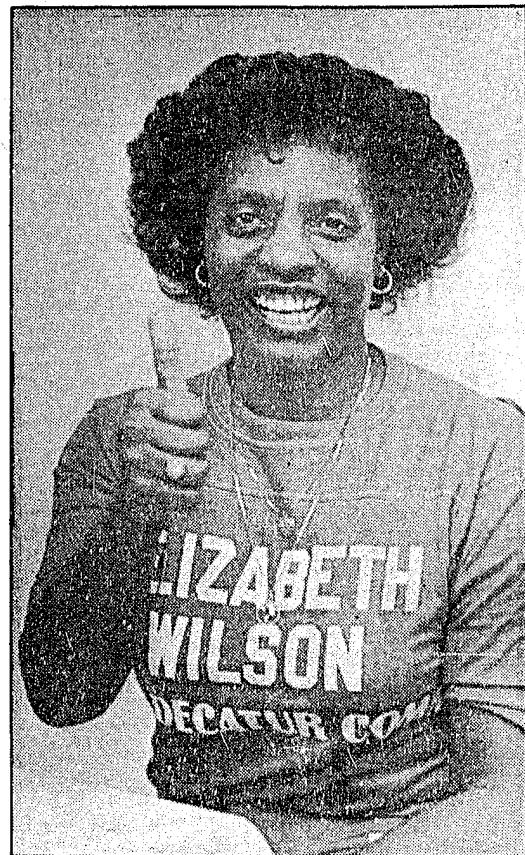
"We have needed a black on the city commission; the population reflects that," she said. "It's hard for someone to make a decision for a certain group of people that he or she is not familiar with."

Ms. Wilson is the administrative director of the Oakhurst Community Health Center, which she started herself in 1970. Located in southern Decatur, the center provides low-cost medical care for low-income patients through federal funding and patient fees.

During her 35 years in Decatur, Ms. Wilson has worked extensively with young and old people. She is a member of the board of directors on the DeKalb Community Council on Aging. And while raising her four children, Ms. Wilson was involved with PTA at the local, state and national level.

She said a strong desire to educate all of her children prevented her from seeking elected office sooner.

"I had wanted to run for the city commission in 1976, but I was divorced that same year and my biggest priority became the education of my four kids."



BILLY DOWNS/Staff

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Elizabeth Wilson wins over six other candidates

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With a hint of motherly pride in her voice, Ms. Wilson noted that her youngest daughter recently became a cum laude graduate of the University of Georgia. Carter Wilson, her youngest son, is the basketball coach at Decatur High School.

Ms. Wilson had a leading role in the creation of Decatur's two-district election system, a compromise plan that defused a potentially polarizing local issue.

Two other black candidates, Ms. Thrower and Harris, also were involved in changing the city election system through a lawsuit they filed in federal court. The suit was dropped in favor of the district voting plan, which was established through local legislation during the last General Assembly.

Under the new election system, two commissioners are elected from each of two election districts. Two election precincts are located in each district. A fifth commissioner is still elected at large.

The population of the city's northern district, bounded by the railroad tracks that split Decatur in half, is about 85 percent white. The southern district population is about 70 percent black.

In the northern district, incumbent Commissioner Candler Broom was re-elected without opposition this year. Incumbent Mayor Ted O'Callaghan, running at large, also received no opposition in his re-election bid.

O'Callaghan received 723 votes; Broom collected 299 votes.