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No delay planned in state remap

Chairman wants it done in one session

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By Ed Anderson

Capital bureau

BATON ROUGE -- The Legislature should be able to redraw the state's political boundaries for offices ranging from Congress to appellate court judgeship at a special session starting March 20, and not put off some of the work to another session or next year, the chairman of the House's chief redistricting panel said Wednesday.

Rep. Rick Gallot, D-Ruston, who chairs the Committee on House and Governmental Affairs, said that although the Legislature is on a tight timeline to redraw districts and get them approved by the U.S. Justice Department, delaying action on drawing the lines that shape congressional districts and others should not wait.

The Legislature has called itself into a special session to redraw political boundaries for the courts of appeal, the state Supreme Court, the congressional delegation, the state House and Senate, the Board of Elementary and Secondary Education and the Public Service Commission.

The special session, the first one initiated by lawmakers themselves in modern times, is expected to open at 5 p.m. March 20 and end no later than 6 p.m. April 13.

Let's 'get 'er done'

Some lawmakers have indicated that the Legislature should draw new lines for themselves and the education board since those races are up this fall, and defer action on the congressional districts, the appellate judgeships and the Public Service Commission to the regular session in April, a later special session or next year under a new Legislature.

Because the state's population has not kept pace with the growth in other states, its U.S. House representation will shrink from seven to six members.

Gallot said there is time in the special session to address all of the redistricting needs.

"I have heard that maybe we should wait to do Congress," Gallot said, since the delegation members will not have to run until the fall of 2012. The delegation will be asked to submit to the Legislature a plan that all seven members agree on, so the Legislature can consider it.

"Our goal is to do the plan for all of those," he said after the committee meeting. "I have no intention of sitting on my hands and not attempting to address all of them. Get 'er done."

Patricia Lowrey-Dufour, the committee's chief staff analyst, told the panel that the Census bureau is expected to make detailed data available on district and precinct population and demographic makeup on Feb. 2 or 3. The committee will use that data to discuss how lines will be redrawn after making a nine-stop swing of the state to get public input from residents.

The state has until May 2 to submit its plans to the federal government and Aug. 29 to get approval of the plans from the Department of Justice, she said. Qualifying for the fall state elections begins Sept. 6.

Laying out the rules

The committee unanimously approved the rules it will use in governing reapportionment of the districts. House Clerk Alfred "Butch" Speer said the rules are designed to inform citizens of what guidelines will be used.

The rules say all districts will be within plus or minus 5 percent of the "ideal population" limits.

All districts must contain just one member and no precincts should be split. The districts should be contiguous and should "respect the recognized political boundaries and natural geography of this state to the extent practicable," Speer said.

Any individual or group is allowed to submit a plan, but it must be a statewide plan, not one that affects just one city or parish.

Lowrey-Dufour said that prohibition does not prohibit someone from suggesting how districts in a city or parish should look, and testifying in favor of that concept.

Rep. Rosalind Jones, D-Monroe, asked that the rule requiring proposals submitted for consideration be statewide and one requiring outside groups to use a specific federally approved computer program be rejected. She said many of her constituents do not have computers or cannot afford to drive to Baton Rouge for the session. Her request was voted down 16-2.

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INFOBOX:

REDISTRICTING MEETINGS

These are the dates, times and locations for public meetings on how the state's legislative, congressional, appellate court, Board of Elementary and Secondary Education and Public Service Commission districts could be drawn.

Feb. 17: Covington, 10 a.m., Fuhrmann Auditorium at the Greater Covington Center, 317 N. Jefferson St.

Feb. 17: New Orleans, 6 p.m., Dillard University's Professional Schools and Sciences Building, Georges Auditorium (Room 115), 2601 Gentilly Blvd.

Feb. 21: Houma, 10 a.m., Houma-Terrebonne Civic Center, 346 Civic Center Blvd.

Feb. 21: Baton Rouge, Baton Rouge Community College, Board Room, Louisiana Building, Community College Drive.

Feb. 22: Lake Charles, 10 a.m., Lake Charles Civic Center, Buccaneer Room, 900 Lakeshore Drive.

Feb. 22: Lafayette, 6 p.m., Acadiana Center for the Arts, Moncus Theater, 101 W. Vermilion St.

Feb. 28: Shreveport, 6 p.m. Louisiana State Exhibit Museum, 3015 Greenwood Road.

March 1: Monroe, 10 a.m., Monroe Civic Center, Bayou Room, 4901 Lea Joyner Memorial Expressway.

March 1: Alexandria, 6 p.m. Alexandria Convention Center at City Hall, 915 Third St.

Source: State House of Representatives

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