

Redistricting will involve multiple agencies

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The much-awaited news about redistricting according to the new ideal populations established through the 2010 census was presented at a public meeting in Covington yesterday.

Members of the Joint Committee of the House Committee on House and Governmental Affairs and the Senate Committee on Senate and Governmental Affairs held the public hearing to unveil the current districts and what changes will be necessary to comply with the new ideals.

Districts will be redrawn for several state agencies, including the Public Service Commission, Board of Elementary and Secondary Education (BESE), Supreme Court, Courts of Appeal, Louisiana House and Senate and the U. S. Congressional districts.

Reapportionment only applies to the U. S. House of Representatives and is the process of allocating the 435 seats among the 50 states based on each state's population as reported in the 2010 census.

Redistricting is the process of redrawing the boundary lines of the districts from which public officials are elected.

The ideal is the population number in any given agency for each district. The actual population figure can not be more or less than a 5 percent difference from the ideal population figure.

The national population increased by 9.71 percent in the past 10 years. In contrast, the state of Louisiana only increased by 1.44 percent. The south increased as a region by 14.29 percent.

For Congress, the ideal population in 2000 was 638,425. Using 2010 figures, the new ideal is set at 755,562. This new ideal, a standard across the country, shows that Louisiana has not kept pace with population growth throughout the nation. This will cause Louisiana to lose a seat in Congress, decreasing from seven to six. How the districts will be reapportioned is the subject of the public meetings and hearings.

In addition, the BESE board districts will change. The new ideal is 566,671, an increase from 2000's 558,622. Although some districts increased or decreased dramatically and others see no change, all districts must be redrawn in order to distribute the population evenly.

For the five-member Public Service Commission, the ideal is 906,674 an increase from 893,795.

The Supreme Court will also change will the new ideal of 647,624. The seven districts were not redrawn after the 2000 census from the 1990 census, but population shifts in this 10-year period will require redistricting.

The state Senate will likely see more representation from this area due to population shifts after Katrina. The target or ideal for each Senate district will be 116,240.

The state Senate and House have seen the most shifts in their districts, with many southern parishes in southeastern Louisiana and the southwestern corner of the state experiencing population losses after Hurricanes Katrina, Rita and Gustav. The middle parishes in the southern part of the state increased in population as well as the Florida parishes.

The House districts, with an ideal target in each district of 43,174, will also be widely affected by redistricting.

The process has created a great deal of uncertainty and during the public hearing, many citizens as well as elected officials made statements regarding their hope for redistricting.

In state Senate District 6, the district runs from Tickfaw to New Orleans, and it takes about an hour to drive the length of the district. One citizen complained that in one neighborhood alone, several districts for state House and Senate seats were carved. She suggested that when considering boundaries, consider neighborhoods and other areas. She also suggested that an independent body be contracted to draw the boundaries instead of elected officials concerned with keeping their seats and constituencies intact.

Others voiced the same concerns that protecting incumbent's districts should not be a priority, but rather the interest of the citizens.

A suggestion to "keep it simple" was also made and the north and south shores of lake Pontchartrain should be kept separate because they have separate concerns. Another opinion opposed this view, with diversity and common needs as the basis for including areas on the south shore such as the port and the city of New Orleans.

Barbara Dodds, representing the League of Women Voters in St. Tammany, applauded the system for holding the hearing and trying to make the process as transparent as possible. "We believe in compact and contiguous districts," she said, "and hope the panel will address this. Concentrate the Northshore to this area."

Covington Mayor Candace Watkins agrees with diversity.

She said, "In any given population, only 15-20 percent of the population get involved. The more diverse the district, the more voices and diversity will be heard."

Another citizen, Penny Ellis agreed with Watkins and said, "We are a diverse nation, now we have become divided. We need diversity."

Ray Canada of Slidell said that breaking political boundaries can benefit metropolitan areas.

Along with redistricting boundaries, the panel must consider other legal factors to prevent adverse affect and gerrymandering based on political parties or race.

To make a comment or obtain more information, residents are asked to visit the Web sites http://house.louisiana.gov/H_Redistricting2011 or e-mail hredist2011@legis.state.la.us; or <http://senate.legis.state.la.us/redist2011> or email sredist2011@legis.state.la.us.