

Stand up, be counted in redistricting

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If you're looking for rock 'em, sock 'em entertainment this evening, Acadiana has more to offer than what we're suggesting here.

But if you're a committed member of our democracy, someone who likes to hold elected officials' tasseled Italian loafers to the fire, then think about going to the Acadiana Center for the Arts, 110 Vermilion St. in Lafayette, tonight. At 6 p.m., state officials will bring their "Redistricting Road Show" to Acadiana to talk about the difficult job of remapping state government and U.S. House districts based on the recently released 2010 Census results.

We'd encourage you to attend. It's often assumed, and not just out of cynicism, that redistricting is about the political survival of elected officials. But a big show of concern by the electorate might be enough to nudge the political calculation toward the public good and away from the election prospects of local legislators.

As an example of how complex and politically fraught the process can be, think back to the post-1990 redistricting for U.S. House seats. Then as now, Louisiana was losing a congressional seat because of slow population growth.

Tough enough right there. But Louisiana also is one of the states that, under the Voting Rights Act, must get U.S. Justice Department approval for new political districts to make sure they're not drawn to dilute minority voting strength. And in the early 1990s, the Justice Department was pushing the other way. The feds effectively forced states to create new districts with big black majorities capable of electing black congressmen.

New Orleans' 2nd District was already represented by an African American. So the only way to get enough black people into another district was to create the infamous "mark of Zorro" 4th District. It slashed from Shreveport to Monroe, down to Alexandria, St. Landry and north Lafayette, then east to Baton Rouge.

Was it really about black representation? Or was it an attempt to create a lot of very white, and more conservative, districts by removing black voters? Either way, the U.S. Supreme Court struck down the newly created "super black" districts, and Louisiana got something like its current U.S. House map — which will undergo big changes again this year as a result of the census.

Census figures, political fights, Supreme Court decisions, federal law — it's all very complicated. But no part of this process works better if it unfolds outside the view of people determined to see that their representatives do the right thing.