

Remap ADV MAR 20 2011 session ES - 1 2011 begins

Lawmakers tout spirit of fair play

BY MARSHA SHULER
Capitol news bureau

Lawmakers are bracing for what they say could be a confrontational few weeks as the Louisiana Legislature's special session begins at 5 p.m. Sunday.

Legislators are tackling their once-a-decade task of recomposing the districts from which they and other officials are elected.

Black and Democratic coalitions in the Louisiana House oppose Republican House Speaker Jim Tucker's plan to redraw that chamber's 105 election district lines. They contend it lacks sufficient minority seats.

In the other chamber, the Louisiana Senate remap is shaping up to be a potential partisan showdown between the newly emergent Republican majority and the chamber's Democratic leadership.

Senate President Joel Chaisson II, a Democrat, is proposing a remap plan, and the Republican delegation is working on a counter plan to maximize the number of GOP districts in the 39-member body.

► See **SESSION**, page 5A

SESSION

Continued from page 1A

"It's my goal that it not be a partisan fight. That we do it in as fair a manner as possible, without regard to political party," said Chaisson, D-Destrehan. "We, of course, have to comply with the Voting Rights Act," which bans the dilution of black voting strength as plans are developed.

On the agenda for the 25-day session are bills crafting new districts for the state House and Senate, the Board of Elementary and Secondary Education, Public Service Commission and U.S. Congress. The legislators called themselves into session at 5 p.m. They invited Gov. Bobby Jindal to speak at 6 p.m.

After every U.S. census count, state governments must realign election districts to account for shifts in population. The decennial nationwide census charted population losses in New Orleans and increases in Baton Rouge and its suburbs.

As a result, New Orleans will lose some of its legislative political clout while the Baton Rouge area stands to gain, as new districts are drawn in the area.

"The population shifts in Louisiana in this redistricting cycle are the most extreme that this state has dealt with since statehood in 1812," said Tucker, of Terrytown.

At the end of the day, Tucker said, he believes that the personal situations of individual lawmakers will trump party or race. "The smart money is still going to be on what's best for their areas and their districts," he said.

Tucker and Chaisson each trotted out initial proposals developed by in-house redistricting experts. Each increases representation in the Baton Rouge area and increases the number of majority-minority seats.

The Legislative Black Caucus

and the Republican Legislative Delegation also hired private consultants who are developing maps designed to protect and expand the influence of their respective groups.

The Black Caucus, led by state Rep. Patricia Smith, D-Baton Rouge, is pushing for a 30th House seat. Smith said the population numbers demand it. Tucker's plan increases minority seats from 27 to 29.

Smith said the caucus is also paying attention to recent legislative switches from Democrat to Republican to determine the impact on Democrat-leaning districts and minority districts.

Meanwhile, Republicans are monitoring the situation in the House.

State Rep. Jane Smith, R-Bossier City, said consultant John Diez, of Gonzales, is helping members review maps to determine the impact of changes on their districts.

"At this point I think all members know there's going to have to be some give and take on everybody's part," said Smith, the House Republican delegation chairwoman.

On the state Senate side, Republican leader Danny Martiny, of Metairie, said Diez is working on a GOP remap plan.

"I know the president (Chaisson) is working very hard to come up with some type of consensus plan," said Martiny. But he said Senate Republicans are "getting their ducks in a row" in case the plan isn't to their liking. "Obviously, it's going to come down to who's got the votes," Martiny said.

Chaisson said his goal is "to be fair and try to have districts that the people out there, that we represent, can understand why they were drawn that way."

Outside groups may want to make the remap efforts partisan, Chaisson said. "But what they have to understand is we are not Washington, D.C., and I

don't think that's what our constituents want," he said.

House Democratic delegation Chairman Rep. John Bel Edwards, D-Amite, said it is going to be hard for partisan politics to rule in remap efforts.

"It's going to be about incumbents trying to come up with districts they can live with that make sense within the constraints of the Voting Rights Act," Edwards said.

Section 5 of the federal Voting Rights Act of 1965 requires changes in Louisiana's election procedures be approved by the U.S. Justice Department to ensure that minority voting strength is not diluted.

Black residents now represent about one-third of the state's population. The state House and Senate plans, presented to date, include additional districts in which minority residents make up the majority of the district.

House redistricting leader Rep. Rick Gallot, D-Ruston, said he has not seen any difference in how members are dealing with each other.

"I see members of different areas still consulting each other the same way they did two months ago when there wasn't a Republican majority," said Gallot.

Senate Democratic delegation Chairman Sen. Eric LaFleur, of Ville Platte, said Republican hiring of a redistricting consultant sends a clear signal that they want to change district demographics in a way that would support one party over the other.

"You are going to have some pretty serious changes because of population shifts," LaFleur said.

"But members, whether Republican or Democrat, are more of the idea you have continuity as the districts change because people become accustomed to who their senators and representatives are, what their district lines are."