

House takes up plan for remap of its districts

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It would combine Lakeview, Metairie

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By Ed Anderson
Capital bureau

BATON ROUGE — A legislative committee voted 14-4 Friday for a bill to redraw all 105 House districts, pitting four pairs of lawmakers in common districts and increasing the number of minority seats from 27 to 30.

The vote by the House Committee on House and Governmental Affairs sends House Bill 1 by Speaker Jim Tucker, R-Algiers, to the full House for debate Monday morning.

In the New Orleans area, Reps. John LaBruzzo, R-Metairie, and Nick Lorusso, R-New Orleans, would be tossed into a Lakeview-Metairie district, and Reps. Charmaine Marchand Stiaes and Wesley Bishop, both D-New Orleans, would be in the same 9th Ward district.

The other areas where incumbents are matched include the Alexandria area where Reps. James Armes, D-Leesville, and Chris Roy, D-Alexandria, have been thrown together, and in the Shreveport area where newly elected Rep. Alan Seabaugh, R-Shreveport, and Rep. Richard Burford, R-Stonewall, have been placed the same district.

LaBruzzo and Lorusso said legislators from Jefferson and Orleans are still looking at ways to draw the lines to keep the two from squaring off in the same district.

Tucker's plan started out to add two more minority districts, but the committee carved out an additional one in the Shreveport area by taking black voters from other nearby minority districts.

Tucker said that change could hurt African-Americans' chances of holding onto a seat or two in the Caddo parish area.

He said he expects Seabaugh to try to change the Caddo Parish area plan and possibly do away with the newly created minority area or find a way to avoid having to run against Burford.

Tucker told reporters that any attempt to reverse the 30th minority district faces "an uphill battle" on the House floor next week.

Rep. Rick Gallot, D-Ruston, the chairman of the committee, said that the U.S. Justice Department, which must approve the plan before it can be implemented for the fall elections, would not look favorably on the House killing the 30th minority district after the panel created it.

"That (change) would have a neon red flag with bells and whistles and lights on it, in my opinion," said Gallot, a lawyer.

Federal law and court rulings have required states to create minority voting districts where the population dictates and they can be easily drawn.

Tucker said when his bill hits the House floor Monday, he will resist major amendments that have not been submitted to staffers and drafted in advance. He also said that an area's delegation should be behind any major change to the House plan.

This is how the committee voted on the bill Friday:

► For: Reps. Taylor Barras, D-New Iberia; Jared Brossett, D-New Orleans; Patrick Connick, R-Harvey; Greg Cromer, R-Slidell; Mike Danahay, D-Sulphur; Herbert Dixon, D-Alexandria; Brett Geymann, R-Lake Charles; Cameron Henry, R-Jefferson; Nancy Landry, R-Lafayette; Lorusso; Erich Ponti, R-Baton Rouge; Jerome "Dee" Richard, I-Thibodaux; Jane Smith, R-Bossier City; and Gallot.

► Against: Reps. Girod Jackson III, D-Marrero; Rosalind Jones, D-Monroe; Tony Ligi, R-Metairie; and M.J. "Mert" Smiley, R-St. Amant.

► Absent: Rep. Steve Pugh, R-Pontchatoula.

Before giving the bill final approval, the committee rejected an proposed change by and Rep. Walt Leger III, D-New Orleans, to expand from seven-and-one-half to eight the number of House districts in Orleans Parish by keeping Lorusso in the city.

The proposal also would have affected more than 20 districts in eight parishes — from eastern New Orleans to Tangipahoa Parish and down into Lafourche Parish. It would have shifted the district containing Louis Armstrong New Orleans International Airport from one controlled by Kenner and East Jefferson voters to a district that would be 60 percent in neighboring St. Charles Parish and 40 percent in Jefferson.

"This will affect a number of districts in a number of parishes," Leger said. The proposal was defeated 4-12.

The panel also approved, 13-2, a major change Tucker wanted in the bill. It places Terrytown and Gretna in the same district, lumps three precincts in Algiers with a district that includes the west bank of Plaquemines Parish, and places about 2,000 residents of the east bank of Plaquemines with a district dominated by St. Bernard Parish.

The panel also adopted, 13-5, an amendment to create a third House seat in Monroe, one more than the city now has.

"As it stands today, I think we have a pretty good chance of pre-clearance (by the Justice Department)," Tucker said. "We have increased minority districts from 27 to 30. I think all of those things are favored for Justice Department standards. ... This plan is supposed be fair and that is what we have here."

Jones, who has pushed for the creation of more minority districts or those with greater African-American influence, said she was "excited" about the bill but voted against it because it could have done more for minorities.

But she praised Tucker and Gallot for having an open process by gathering input from citizens around the state and making meetings, redistricting plans and amendments available on the Internet.

"Nothing was done in smoke-filled rooms," Jones said.

Ed Anderson can be reached at eanderson@timespicayune.com or 225.342.5810.