



Everything New Orleans

## Redistricting is expected to cost New Orleans three districts in the Louisiana House of Representatives

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By Times-Picayune Staff

*This is the first in a periodic series looking the redistricting process that will follow the **2010 census**. Today's story focuses on the Louisiana House seats in Orleans Parish. Coming next, The Times-Picayune will look at the House landscape in the rest of the New Orleans metropolitan area. The Legislature convenes March 20.*



House Speaker Jim Tucker, left, is term-limited. Reps. Walker Hines, center, and Juan LaFonta, right, say they won't run for re-election.

State lawmakers are two months from convening special session to redraw district lines for the Legislature, but New Orleans legislators are already scurrying amid projections that the city will lose at least three districts in the Louisiana House of Representatives.

There is the possibility -- at least numerically -- of losing a fourth, though members of the delegation say they hope to keep the carnage to a minimum, both to

preserve the city's influence and to minimize battles among incumbents in the fall elections.

The expected loss will constitute about a quarter to a third of the city's House delegation, which now account for 14 of the 105 House seats: 11 entirely Orleans districts, one split between Jefferson Parish and Orleans and two more that reach into the city from neighboring parishes.

The city also is projected to lose at least one Senate seat as lawmakers redraw districts for the first time since Hurricane Katrina scrambled the population across south Louisiana.

Rep. Charmaine Marchand Stiaes, a New Orleans Democrat whose 9th Ward-based district has lost much of its population, said the session could produce "a lot of anger and bitterness. ... I may politically have to run against my colleague" if the two wind up in the same district.

The potential quagmire, at least in terms of incumbent cannibalism in Orleans Parish, could be mitigated with House Speaker Jim Tucker, R-Algiers, barred by term limits from seeking re-election and with Reps. Juan LaFonta, a Gentilly Democrat, and Walker Hines, an Uptown Republican, saying they won't run for re-election.

But uncertainty remains for the rest of the delegation,

"Every district in New Orleans is at risk" off being revamped, Rep. Walter Leger III, D-New Orleans, said. "I can't imagine any district will not be affected in New Orleans" because one district's change will affect another.

The Orleans moves also will ripple across the rest of the state, particularly with U.S. Justice Department placing a premium on protecting the voting strength of African-American voters. As majority-black districts fall off the Orleans House map, lawmakers must strive to replace them elsewhere, most likely in Baton Rouge and Shreveport.

"It will not be a pretty political sight," Kirby Goidel, a professor of political science at the Louisiana State University, said of the three-week special session. "It is ugly and messy and nasty and unsightly, but it is important for democratic governance."

The session, the first one initiated by lawmakers and not a governor in modern political times, will open March 20 and must end by 6 p.m. April 13. Besides drawing new legislative lines, the agenda also includes new districts for the state Board of Elementary and Secondary Education, some state appeals courts, the Public Service Commission and, if there is time, new congressional districts.

Louisiana's 2010 population is 4,533,372, up from 4,468,976 in 2000, but the growth was off the national pace, costing Louisiana one of its seven U.S. House seats.

Tucker, noting that the next federal elections are not until 2012, said he wants to finish all the maps, but said the Legislature can put off the challenge of condensing the congressional district. With lawmakers already preparing re-election campaigns, there is no such luxury for the legislative maps.

Lawmakers must keep the 105 state House seats and 39 state Senate seats, with the lines moving based on updated population figures. Official parish and precinct population counts are not expected from the U.S. Census Bureau until Feb. 2. But the official state count, released in December, means that the ideal House district will have 43,174, up from a target of 42,561 after the 2000 census.

U.S. Supreme Court precedent allows variation of plus or minus 5 percent from the ideal or, for the state House, 41,015 to 45,333.

Nearly every Orleans House district fell at the bottom or below that range in 2000, even before the post-Katrina population losses. So even the districts that have retained or recovered population since the storm -- Leger District 91, Rep. Helena Moreno's District 93 and Rep. Neil Abramson's District 98, areas that reach from the French Quarter through the Garden District and Uptown -- could be looking to pick up voters.

Then there are the most devastated districts of eastern New Orleans: Stiaes' 99th, Rep. Austin Badon's District 100 and District 101, vacated by Rep. **Cedric Richmond's** election to Congress. Richmond's successor -- either lawyer Wesley Bishop, businessman Roland Barthe or businessman Willie Jones -- will be the most junior member of delegation after an upcoming special election. Badon is eligible for another term. Stiaes said she will decide her re-election plans later.

Somewhere in between are Rep. Nick Lorusso of District 94, anchored in Lakeview, and Rep. Jared Brossett of District 97, anchored by Gentilly. They have a remaining base, but need significant numbers to reach the ideal range. Across the Mississippi River, Tucker's District 86 and Democratic Rep. Jeff Arnold's District 102 boast perhaps the most stable population.

Of the entirely Orleans districts, only Lorusso represents a majority white district.

The Voting Rights Act of 1965 does not expressly prohibit reducing the number of minority seats, but in practice, federal voting rights attorneys are wary of any "retrogression." The Justice Department must approve Louisiana's redistricting plan for it to take effect.

That gives at least some protection to the Orleans lawmakers with strong remaining population bases. There currently are 27 majority-black House districts statewide.

LaFonta said his Gentilly district could be used to bolster the numbers for his neighboring colleagues: Brossett and Moreno. Moving Uptown, those dominoes also could affect Abramson and Leger.

Besides the eastern New Orleans representatives, Lorusso could have the biggest challenge picking up Orleans voters without altering the demographic makeup of his district. His could pick up voters from Hines, but the adjacent portion of Hines' district is majority-African American Holly Grove.

Lorusso could reach into Jefferson Parish for voter demographics similar to the whiter, more conservative Lakeview, but that could set off a chain that Jefferson lawmakers want to avoid. Efforts to reach Lorusso were not successful.

Russ Henderson of Violet, and Cameron Henry of Jefferson represent majority-white districts that are based in other parishes but reach into Orleans.

Henry, who represents a handful of River Bend precincts, said he would like to maintain an Orleans connection, though he said he would give it up willingly if it "is needed to make someone whole," including Lorusso.

*Bill Barrow and Ed Anderson wrote this report. Barrow can be reached at **bbarrow@timespicayune.com** or 504.826.3452. Anderson can be reached at **eanderson@timespicayune.com** or 225.342.5810.*

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