

Date: Feb 24, 2011; Section: Editorial; Page: A5

Columnist

Loss of congressman hurts

Jim Beam

“We just can’t please everybody.”

I overheard a legislative official make that comment after a public hearing here Tuesday concerning the loss of one of Louisiana’s seven congressional seats. He’s right, of course, because some folks are going to lose a congressman.

Isn’t it amazing how most people hate Congress, but love their own congressman?

What this all boils down to is creating six instead of seven congressional districts. There is no way to keep from upsetting an awful lot of voters when you are forced to do that.

The unanimous theme at the hearing conducted here by a joint meeting of the House and Senate Governmental Affairs Committees was, “Keep Lake Charles and Lafayette together.”

A hearing later in the day at Lafayette produced the same reaction. Speakers urged committee members to keep the two cities in the same congressional district.

Tough job

Sounds simple, doesn’t it? But it’s rather complicated. Consider, for example, what happened in Houma on Monday.

Some 300 citizens urged the same committee to keep Terrebonne and Lafourche together. At least one proposed congressional redistricting map splits them apart.

The presidents of those two parishes asked members of the committee to hear their pleas, according to a report on HoumaToday.com.

“If you crossed the border (between the two parishes), you wouldn’t notice a difference, and that is why we are here today,” said Charlotte Randolph, president of Lafourche Parish.

A 19-year-old university student said, “I beg you. Don’t separate the voice of coastal Louisiana.”

Forums in New Orleans and Covington produced different requests, according to The Times-Picayune. Orleans voters don’t want their minority district linked to Baton Rouge.

“What does Baton Rouge have in common with New Orleans?” a French Quarter resident asked.

Another said, “We want to be represented by someone who lives and understands our pain.”

Hearings will be held next week in Shreveport and Monroe and a similar theme will be heard there. North Louisiana citizens want separate districts anchored in their two cities.

The last hearing is scheduled for Alexandria. Can you blame those folks if they would like to have their city be the hub of one of those six districts? It was at one time when the state had eight congressmen.

Put yourself in the place of members of those legislative committees and you can see what unpopular decisions they are going to have to make.

Rep. Rick Gallot, chairman of the House Governmental Affairs Committee, gave good advice to his members about how to deal with these arguments.

“I suggest you have all the numbers and are soaking it all in,” Gallot said. “If you haven’t heard from your congressman yet, I suggest you will shortly... . Keep your powder dry and try not to commit until you have a full picture.”

Gallot said common economic, cultural and other interests between communities will play a part in the final decision.

Bruce Conque with the Greater Lafayette Chamber of Commerce talked about that when he spoke here in favor of keeping Lake Charles and his city together.

"We stay arm-in-arm with the residents of this area," he said. "There's more than just a linear link between Lafayette and Lake Charles. There's also a feeling of community."

Seniority in Congress also can't be ignored. U.S. Reps. Rodney Alexander, R-Alexandria, and Charles Boustany, R-Lafayette, are now in positions of power that could mean added dividends for their districts and the state as a whole.

U.S. Rep. Jeff Landry, R-New Iberia, is on the other end of the spectrum. He is the newest congressman in the state's House delegation. However, he waged an effective election campaign with tea party support that he will enjoy throughout the redistricting process.

Landry's interests would be served best by a coastal congressional district being proposed from the Texas to the Mississippi coasts. However, Calcasieu Parish isn't included, and that would probably link this area to the Shreveport congressional district.

Opponents of that plan insist it would be better to have more than one member of Congress from coastal Louisiana in order to better protect the state's interests.

Gallot said he wants to hear from the state's congressmen, but he wants any plan they recommend to be a consensus among the delegation. Landry has already said he wasn't party to one plan that was drawn up by other members of the delegation, so getting a united agreement isn't likely.

Effective spokesmen

Spokesmen at the Lake Charles public hearing served this area's interests well, and the joint committee got pretty much the same reaction later Tuesday in Lafayette.

How successful all of these efforts will be won't be known until the Legislature makes its final decision at a special session beginning March 20. Meanwhile, we can expect an intense lobbying effort by citizens and public officials from every corner of the state.

The two committees that will begin the redistricting process have gone all out to make it as transparent as possible. We thank their members for listening to what those of us in this corner of the state had to say.

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