

Columnist

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Legislators face tough session

Jim Beam

A number of competing interests will converge on the state Capitol for a special legislative session beginning today. It's a sure bet some of them are going to leave unhappy by the time the session ends on April 13.

The hot-button issue is reapportionment. It is a process that will use 2010 federal census population figures to redraw election district lines for members of Congress, state legislators, courts and two statewide public bodies.

Most of those currently holding those offices have one major goal in mind — a new term at the next election. And for statewide officials, state legislators, parish police jurors or councilmen and others down the line, those elections are coming Oct. 22 and Nov. 19.

Preliminary plans for realigning those districts began to surface months ago, but the pace picked up last week. And other plans are certain to surface before the merry-go-round ends.

Just to give you an idea of those competing interests mentioned earlier, here are some of them.

More minority districts

One plan for the 105-member state House of Representatives increased minority districts from 27 to 29, but that wasn't enough for the Legislative Black Caucus. It wants 30, preferably another seat in the Shreveport area.

State Rep. Patricia Smith, D-Baton Rouge, chairs the caucus that was scheduled to release its own redistricting plan over the weekend.

"We are looking to maximize the African-American districts in the House," Smith told The Advocate of Baton Rouge. "We are 32 percent of the state in population. Having 30 seats in the House is not unreasonable."

Speaker of the House Jim Tucker, RAlgiers, who handled the House proposal Friday, said adding another minority district would dilute the voting strength of minorities in other districts.

Take the district of Rep. Barbara Norton, D-Shreveport, for example. Her District 3 in Caddo Parish is 88.7 percent black under Tucker's proposal. The odds are Norton would like to keep those minority numbers as high as possible.

Eight other minority districts have black populations exceeding 70 percent.

Then there are the federal and state officials interested in how the Legislature is going to reduce the current seven congressional districts from seven to six. None of the seven sitting U.S. House members wants to face one of his colleagues in the 2012 elections, but there is no escaping that reality.

The odds are that newly elected U.S. Rep. Jeff Landry, R-New Iberia, will probably have to run against U.S. Rep. Charles Boustany, R-Lafayette, who represents the disappearing 7th District.

There are other sidelights to this story. Calcasieu officials are opposed to being made part of the Shreveport congressional district. Calcasieu and Lafayette parishes want to stay in the same district. So do Terrebonne and Lafourche parishes. And Baton Rouge officials don't want New Orleans encroaching on its black population to maintain the state's single minority congressional district.

Some black legislators wanted to create a second minority congressional district. However, state Rep. Rick Gallot, D-Ruston, said it couldn't be done and still meet the "compact and contiguous" requirements or a legal challenge. Gallot is chairman of the House Governmental Affairs Committee that gets first crack at reapportionment plans before sending them to the full House.

Logic dictates the congressional plan could be drawn much easier if north Louisiana was in one district, and some plans have done that. However, state Sen. Bob Kostelka, R-Monroe, chairs a committee making the final decision, and he's opposed to his area being in the same district as Shreveport.

A dozen congressional plans may be in the works before this one is settled.

The state Board of Elementary and Secondary Education has 11 members, and eight of them are elected. The other three are appointed by the governor. BESE has two minority districts, but the Legislative Black Caucus reportedly wants a third one.

Incumbents to compete

The House redistricting plan sponsored by Tucker has incumbents running against one another in three districts. He said it's unfortunate, but can't be avoided.

Tucker told The Associated Press only four of the 105 House districts were left untouched. He said the rest either had too many or too few people or were impacted by neighboring districts.

"People work hard to get elected," he said. "They work hard in their jobs. And the population shifts and puts them with another incumbent who's probably a friend." State Senate President Joel Chaisson, D-Destrehan, released his chamber's redistricting plan late Friday. It increases minority districts from 10 to 11 in the 39-member Senate, and so far the plan has caused no major ripples. You can't blame legislators for being somewhat apprehensive about what they are getting ready to do. The outcomes aren't popular in some instances, and they don't like to offend fellow public officials around the state. Lawmakers could have handed the work over to an independent commission, a process promoted by good government groups. However, that has never been popular with legislators. The only alternative is to bang the opening gavels, make the hard choices and then let the chips fall where they may.

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