

Plan shifts House districts, forces competition

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BATON ROUGE — Speaker Jim Tucker's proposed redistricting plan for the House of Representatives has raised concerns from incumbents who see their districts eliminated or reshaped to the point that some will have to run against each other.

Tucker, R-Terrytown, laid out his draft proposal Friday for the House and Governmental Affairs Committee to review. "Nobody's happy," he admitted immediately.

It's tough for lawmakers to eliminate districts or be forced to run in a district that contains few of the original constituents who put them in office four years ago, he said. "People work hard to get elected, and then the population shifts."

He said he also feels for the lawmakers who will have to run against friends.

The plan, based on numbers from the 2010 census, eliminates districts in New Orleans and creates six new minority districts in various parts of the state.

Tucker's plan creating a minority district that spans Natchitoches, DeSoto and Red River parishes shifts existing districts so that Rep. Chris Roy Jr. of Alexandria and Rep. James Armes of Leesville, both Democrats, would run against each other in a newly constructed district.

Roy said Friday that he hadn't seen the map yet, but Tucker had called him early Friday morning to give him the news.

"It's odd that two Democrats are pitted against each other when in the original

proposal (Natchitoches Republican Rep.) Rick Nowlin and I were to be against each other," Roy said in a telephone interview. "It was to be an Alexandria-Natchitoches district, but for some reason, that was all changed."

In the past several months, the political makeup of the House and Senate has changed from majority Democrat to majority Republican. The committees that consider the plans also have a Republican majority.

"Rep. Armes and I are best of friends and former seatmates, so this whole process is very disturbing," Roy said. "Neither one of us had any input into how this was done."

Roy said that with a three-week session, there's a chance to "modify things and go from there."



Roy

He was on his way Friday to Baton Rouge to watch his son play baseball in a tournament and said, philosophically, "When all is said and done, going to see my son play baseball games in his senior year outweighs any anxiety about redistricting."

Armes was not available for comment.

Nowlin said after the meeting that he's not too pleased with Tucker's plan because his house is located on the street that forms the border of his proposed new district.

"I'm less unhappy than I was last time when I found out I didn't have a district," he said. "My business and my legislative office are no longer in the district. God is good because I at least have a district. God bless Speaker Tucker."

With the change, "I've

got 26,000 people new to my district," Nowlin said. "I'm losing more than half of Natchitoches Parish and half of the city. It's separating the city of Natchitoches from the Cane River region, cutting it in half, so the cultural, historical and economic ties in the communities would be damaged."

The proposed District 24 that Nowlin could run in includes about 20,000 people in Sabine Parish, 6,000 in Rapides Parish and 17,500 in Natchitoches Parish.

The new proposed District 23, Nowlin's former district number, takes in parts of DeSoto, Red River, Sabine and Natchitoches parishes to make a 59.57 percent minority district.

The plan also creates a new minority District 93 that has 57.8 percent black population across parts of Iberia, St. Martin and Lafayette parishes. Carving out the new district shifts election zones currently represented by several incumbents.

The plan does not create a new majority-white House district in the Lafayette area, which many expected.

In the Monroe area, the population shift led to the reshaping of District 16, currently represented by Rep. Kay Katz, R-Monroe, into a majority-black district that stretches into Bastrop in Morehouse Parish.

Katz is term-limited and cannot run for re-election.

Rep. Rosalind Jones, D-Monroe, said she is "very excited about the creation of a new minority district" because the numbers (62.4 percent black) are "very clear" that the minority population warranted a new district.

With that move, though, "I'm losing 80 percent of my district to go north into

Monroe proper," she said. Jones and most other members of the Louisiana Legislative Black Caucus wanted another minority district in the Shreveport area. They said Tucker's original plan had one, but he changed it.

Tucker said he did look at the "concept" of another Shreveport minority district, but the numbers were not enough to assure that a black candidate could be elected.

Caucus Chair Rep. Pat Smith, D-Baton Rouge, said only one Caucus member voted against asking Tucker to create a new district.

Tucker said that was Rep. Barbara Norton, D-Shreveport, whose percentage of black voters would have been reduced, making it possible for a white candidate to be elected if the new district were created.

"I believe there is more than adequate minority representation in the Shreveport area," he said.

Other new minority districts are in Baton Rouge, the River Parishes region southeast of Baton Rouge and in western Jefferson Parish.

Besides Roy and Armes, the proposed plan would pit New Orleans incumbents Democrats Wesley Bishop and Charmaine Marchand Stiaes, Republicans John Labruzzo and Nick Larusso, Republican Walker Hines and Democrat Neil Abramson, and Democrats Juan LaFonta and Jared Brossett.

Hines has announced his intention to run for secretary of state, and LaFonta has announced that he is not running for re-election.

Tucker said he technically would be in a combined district, too, but he is term-limited and can't run for re-election.