

Battling over the lines

ES - 1 2011

Black Caucus calls for more diverse districts

BY MARSHA SHULER
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House Speaker Jim Tucker's plan for redrawing the Louisiana House's 105 districts came under attack Monday by black lawmakers some of whom say the proposal could dilute the influence of black voters.

Black House districts in East Baton Rouge Parish and elsewhere are being drawn with too many black residents and that's bad, said state

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Advocate staff photo by ARTHUR D. LAUCK

State Rep. Cameron Henry, R-New Orleans, standing, shows House Speaker Jim Tucker, R-Terrytown, an email he received from a voter about plans to redraw the House's 105 districts. Looking on is House senior analyst Patricia Lowrey-Dufour.

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Rep. Michael Jackson, No Party-Baton Rouge.

Under Tucker's plan, for example, Jackson said his district, which includes Mid City, and at least two others in the parish, would become 80 percent black.

"All the African-American districts are pretty well packed, with not much diversity in them at all," said Jackson. "We are trying to make our districts more diverse so we have cross-representation of issues and people in our districts."

The more black voters in majority white districts, the more influence they can potentially exert in elections and on the actions of those elected and vice versa as far as white voters in majority black districts, he said.

"We have major concerns about packing," said state Rep. Patricia Smith, D-Baton Rouge, leader of the Legislative Black Caucus.

But a member of the House redistricting panel said that what Jackson and Smith are complaining about is a function of the drawing of a new East Baton Rouge black district.

State Rep. Erich Ponti, R-Baton Rouge, said black voters had to be taken from white districts. "Everything had to move around," Ponti said. "It is what it is."

Jackson said the Black Caucus will be laying the foundation for both U.S. Justice Department and legal challenges that packing "has been used as a strategy to limit the influence of African-Americans across the state of Louisiana."

Smith said the caucus will offer alternate legislation as well as amendments to House Bill 1 by Tucker, R-Terrytown.

"We basically told him we did not want anything over 70 percent," except in New Orleans where there is a unique situation, she said.

Amid the packing complaints, House redistricting leader state Rep. Rick Gallot, D-Ruston, filed an alternative House remap plan that would add a 30th black district — one more than the Tucker plan calls for. The new district would be in Shreveport.

In interviews with Baton Rouge area lawmakers, they said they like getting three additional House seats, including a new black district, and the political clout the expanded delegation would bring.

Ponti said there was an effort to keep as many districts whole in East Baton Rouge as possible. Every district in the area delegation changes quite a bit because of growth in south Baton Rouge and the new minority district, he said.

State Rep. J. Rogers Pope, R-Livingston, said he loses between 11,000 and 12,000 people to get to the ideal district population required.

"For the district I represent, it's going to be fine," Pope said. "There were some precincts I would have loved to have kept."

Pope said he is a little concerned about the geographic size of the new legislative district created in Tucker's plan.

"It's going to be portioned about half in Livingston and the other half is going through Ascension, St. John and St. James. I'm not sure how that's going to play out quite frankly," Pope said.

"I just think going through four parishes would be hard on anyone," he added. "I'm not sure why it has to be that way."

State Rep. Eddie Lambert said he is OK with his new district, but he has to lose some 22,000 people because of the rapid Ascension Parish growth. He said he loses the eastern one-third of the district and part of the southern part in the Gonzales area.

"I'll continue to represent everybody in Ascension Parish because the interests are the same, which is roads, roads, roads," said Lambert, R-Prairieville.

"I don't think anything they do is bad for me," said Capital Area Delegation chairman Rep. Steve Carter, R-Baton Rouge.

State Rep. Franklin Foil, R-Baton Rouge, said he ends up with a "more compact" district and he likes that.



Smith