

REDISTRICTING BATTLE

Armes to fight to end Lawmaker doesn't support Leesville-Alexandria merger

BY JIM BEAM

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BATON ROUGE — Rep. James Armes of Leesville said he's down, but he's not out. The Democratic legislator Friday became one of the victims of the reshuffling of seats in the state House of Representatives.

"Tell the voters in Beauregard and Vernon parishes I'm not giving up without a fight," Armes said after learning he was merged into a voting district with Rep. Chris Roy, D-Alexandria. The two would compete in the fall legislative elections.

The House Governmental Affairs Committee voted 14-4 to send the bill realigning the 105 seats in the House to the floor for debate next week. Reps. Mike Danahay, DSulphur, and Brett Geymann, R-Moss Bluff, voted for the bill.

Only one other House election district in Southwest Louisiana experienced major changes. It affects Rep. Frank Howard, R-Many.

Speaker of the House Jim Tucker is sponsoring the redistricting legislation. He worked with Armes and others affected by the bill all week, but withdrew an amendment at the last minute that gave Armes some relief.

The compromise would have given Armes voters in Beauregard and Vernon parishes, but public officials from Alexandria, Pineville and Rapides Parish opposed that plan because it would have cost that area a representative.

Armes will have an opportunity to try and make some changes by introducing an amendment to Tucker's bill when it comes up for floor debate, but Tucker said he would only go along with changes agreed to by all the parties involved and those that don't affect pre-clearance of the plan by the U.S. Department of Justice.

Tucker said the alternative was to put Roy in a district with Rep. Herbert Dixon, DAlexandria, and that would make it tough to get the Justice Department to approve the redistricting plan. Dixon is a minority legislator.

The district in which Armes and Roy would compete has a population of 23,535 in Rapides Parish and 20,785 in Vernon Parish. That puts Armes at a disadvantage because he said 10,000 of the Vernon Parish voters are stationed at Fort Polk and don't vote in the district.

Most military personnel are registered to vote in their home areas.

The creation of a new minority House district north of Armes' area caused a domino effect in parishes south of there. The new district is made up of voters from DeSoto, Natchitoches, Red River and Sabine parishes. Its voters are 37 percent white and 59.6 percent black.

Rep. Rick Nowlin, RNatchitoches, lost voters in his home parish to the new district.

Earlier in the week, Armes told The Town Talk of Alexandria, "I'm not going to take this lying down. Most of this had to do with Rick Nowlin not wanting to run against Chris Roy."

Howard's new district has 13,279 people in Beauregard Parish and 31,549 in Vernon Parish. He lost voters in DeSoto, Red River and Sabine parishes, but said he is wellknown in the other two.

The Tucker plan caused incumbents to run against one another in three other areas. Two of the districts are in the New Orleans area and the third is in the Shreveport area.

Democratic incumbents will square off in two of those districts and Republicans in the other two.

