

# House committee supports redistricting plan for BESE, PSC

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A bill that would redraw boundaries for Louisiana's top school board and the state's utility regulators breezed through a House committee Friday.

The measure, House Bill 2, won approval without objection in the state House and Governmental Affairs Committee and next faces action in the full House of Representatives.

The new lines would apply to the state Board of Elementary and Secondary Education, or BESE. The board sets policies for about 668,000 public school students statewide.

Eight of the panel's 11 members are elected. All of those boundaries have to be redrawn to reflect the 2010 U.S. Census.

Three other board members are named by the governor.

The same committee Friday approved a separate bill that would redraw boundaries for the panel that regulates utilities in Louisiana.

The BESE plan, which is sponsored by House Speaker Jim Tucker, R-Terrytown, would preserve two black majority districts.

One is District 8, which is now

held by Linda Johnson of Plaquemine. Black residents would make up 58.1 percent of that district, Tucker told the House and Governmental Affairs Committee.

The other one is District 2, which is held by Louella Givens of New Orleans. Black residents would make up 60.88 percent of that district.

Givens and Johnson are black.

Tucker said the new boundaries would continue to give black candidates for BESE a solid chance of winning.

State Rep. Herbert Dixon, D-Alexandria, offered a separate bill that he said would create a third district in northwest Louisiana where blacks make up a majority.

But Jim Garvey, vice-president of BESE, said some members of the board objected to Dixon's bill because it would require numerous parishes to be split.

The committee rejected Dixon's bill on a vote of 4 for and 13 against.

Garvey, who was designated to represent BESE on redistricting, said the board backs Tucker's legislation. However,

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he also said he hopes black majorities in District 8 and District 2 can be increased as the bill goes through the Legislature.

The ideal population for each district is 566,671 residents. Deviations are not supposed to exceed five percent.

The new lines would shrink District 6, which is held by Chas Roemer of Baton Rouge. It has about 142,000 too many residents. The District 2 slot held by Givens has about 172,000 too few residents.

Under the bill, the district would add whole parishes to offset population losses, mostly because of Hurricane Katrina.

Meanwhile, the committee also approved House Bill 38, which sets new boundaries for the five-member Public Service Commission.

The plan would cost the Baton Rouge area district of the PSC two parishes and parts of north Baton Rouge to offset population gains.

"I am satisfied with the plan," PSC Chairman Jimmy Field of Baton Rouge told the committee.

Under the bill, the PSC would retain one black-majority district.