

Number of House minority seats could lead to showdown

ADV MAR 26 2011

ES -1 2011

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The reshaping of the Louisiana House's 105 election districts headed Friday toward a likely showdown on the number of majority black districts required under federal voting rights laws.

The state House and Governmental Affairs Committee voted 14-4 to send the redistricting plan to the full House for debate with a few minor alterations

and one big one.

"The plan is an effective plan that will move the state forward for the next 10 years," said legislation sponsor House Speaker Jim Tucker, R-Terrytown.

The biggest change the panel made was the addition of a majority black district in Shreveport — bringing to 30 the number in the proposed remap plan.

There are 27 majority-minority seats in the House today. Tucker's remap proposal in-

cluded 29 and he opposed the 30th.

After the meeting, Tucker said he expects some Shreveport lawmakers to try to strip the Shreveport district change when he seeks House approval of the measure Monday.

"It's an uphill battle," said Tucker, who said he's asked for more information for further analysis.

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SHOWDOWN

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House redistricting committee chairman Rep. Rick Gallot said removing the 30th minority district could hurt House efforts to get quick U.S. Justice Department approval of the plan.

"That will be a neon red flag with bells and whistles and lights on it," said Gallot, D-Ruston.

The committee-passed plan leaves intact the Baton Rouge area's three seat House membership gain. One of the newly created districts would be majority black.

Election districts must be redrawn every 10 years based on population shifts since the last U.S. census. Federal law requires the districts to be somewhat equal in population. In the case of the House, the ideal population is 43,174.

The federal Voting Rights Act of 1965 bans dilution of black voter strength in the drawing of districts and encourages the creation of districts in areas where minority voters can have influence.

The U.S. Justice Department must pre-clear any House plan approved because of Louisiana's history of discrimination in election laws and practices.

"As the plan stands today, I believe we have a very good chance of pre-clearance. We



Advocate staff photo by ARTHUR D. LAUCK

Louisiana House Clerk Butch Speer, left, consults with Speaker Jim Tucker, R-Terrytown, and senior legislative analyst Patricia Lowrey-Dufour on Friday prior to committee action on legislation redrawing the House's 105 election districts.

have met all the major issues the Justice Department will review," Tucker told the panel before the vote.

The metropolitan New Orleans area lost six seats mainly because of population losses in the wake of Hurricane Katrina

— most of them with minority voter bases. Those had to be relocated elsewhere.

High growth areas such as East Baton Rouge, Livingston and Ascension, got increased representation which translates into more political influ-

ence. Three of the six new districts where there are no incumbents

are in the capital area. One is located in East Baton Rouge, a new minority district

in the north-central area; another is in Livingston and a third based in Livingston that includes parts of Ascension, St. John and St. James parishes.

Other new House districts would be located in Acadiana, Tangipahoa and St. Tammany. The Acadiana district is another of the new minority districts.

Besides Baton Rouge and Acadiana, new minority districts are created in Shreveport, the River Region, West Jefferson, in the Natchitoches-DeSoto-Sabine area and in Ouachita.

The House committee plan throws four sets of incumbent representatives in the same election districts. Facing potential head-to-head match-ups are:

■ State Reps. John LaBruzzo, R-Metairie, and Nick Lorusso, R-New Orleans.

■ State Reps. Chris Roy, D-Alexandria, and James Armes, D-Leesville. Tucker dropped a proposal for Roy to face fellow Democrat and Rapides Parish Rep. Herbert Dixon of Alexandria.

■ State Reps. Charmaine Stiaes, D-New Orleans, and Wesley Bishop, D-New Orleans;

■ State Reps. Alan Seabaugh, R-Shreveport, and Richie Burford, R-Stonewall.