

SPECIAL SESSION

Redraw getting personal

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Term limits impact legislative remapping

BATON ROUGE (AP) — Although the redrawing of state political maps happens every decade in the Louisiana Legislature, a new wrinkle is being manipulated to shield incumbents and increase minority representation in this redistricting special session: term limits.

With six state senators and 11 state representatives unable to run again for their current seats, their districts are on the chopping block to protect other lawmakers' reelection bids and boost the number of lawmakers representing majority black districts.

Some term-limited lawmakers say proposals to sacrifice their districts are splitting apart parishes and towns with longtime ties and are running afoul of redistricting principles that support keeping together those communities with historical and economic similarities.

Two senators who can't run again this fall are strongly objecting to the divisions of their districts to help create new minority districts, but so far their arguments haven't gained traction with their colleagues in the special session that entered its second week Sunday.

"My district gets picked apart because of term limits. If you don't think term limits have a long-term impact on this state, just look at me," said Sen. Rob Marionneau, D-Livonia, who's trying to fight a Senate redesign that would divvy his district into pieces to help create a new minority district in south Louisiana. The changes being considered by the state House and Senate — and up for debate this week — will determine legislative representation for at least a decade and could guide future redesigns by becoming the maps off which later lawmakers will work to protect themselves and other incumbents.

House Speaker Jim Tucker, R-Terrytown, is leading the reshaping of the House's 105 districts. A term-limited lawmaker himself, Tucker said the lack of incumbents for some seats made it easier to account for population losses in the New Orleans area after Hurricane Katrina and for increased population elsewhere around the state, like in Baton Rouge and its suburbs.

"It was helpful in that it allowed greater flexibility in those general areas," Tucker said.

The current House remap proposal, scheduled for debate in the full House on Monday, would boost minority districts from 27 to 30. Pieces of at least two term-limited House members' districts — those of Rep. Kay Katz, R-Monroe, and Gary Smith, D-Norco — were chopped up to help create new majority black districts.

While state representatives continue to haggle over the number and shape of minority districts in the House, senators have engaged in a far louder feud over a proposal to increase the number of minority districts from 10 to 11 in the 39-member Senate. At the heart of the dispute is the splintering of the districts of Marionneau and Sen. Joe McPherson, D-Woodworth, to get to 11 majority black seats.

Because of post-Katrina migration out of New Orleans, the city would lose one minority Senate seat, under the plan offered by Senate President Joel Chaisson, D-Destrehan, and scheduled for debate in the Senate on Tuesday.

Chaisson argues the state has to shift that minority seat elsewhere and add another one for Louisiana to get approval from the U.S. Justice Department for its new map under the federal Voting Rights Act, which is designed to ensure adequate minority representation in states with a history of discrimination.

Chaisson acknowledged that to protect senators seeking re-election, he divided Marionneau's and McPherson's districts to create the new minority seats. So, parishes like Iberville and Pointe Coupee won't remain together in one district, and the towns of Alexandria and Pineville in McPherson's central Louisiana district would be split apart.