

Legislative maps face fight

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The Legislative Black Caucus is preparing to file its objections with the U.S. Justice Department on legislative remap plans, caucus chairwoman and state Rep. Patricia Smith said Thursday.

Lawsuits challenging the House and Senate plans based on their dilution of minority voting strength are also on the horizon, said Smith, D-Baton Rouge.

Louisiana is a federal Voting Rights Act state because of its

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history of racial discrimination in election laws and procedures.

The designation means the state must get pre-clearance from the U.S. Department of Justice for changes in election laws, including the shape of districts from which legislators run.

Gov. Bobby Jindal signed legislative and congressional

remap plans into law Thursday — a day after lawmakers completed a special redistricting session.

The plans redraw election districts based on population changes since the 2000 U.S. census.

House Speaker Jim Tucker and Senate President Joel Chaisson II said they are confident new election districts of their respective chambers will meet federal election law requirements and win Department of Justice approval.

Candidates for the Legisla-

ture will run from the newly shaped districts this fall.

Chaisson said the Senate's filing will be done in-house.

"I do intend to prepare the best submission I can," said Chaisson, D-Destrehan.

Tucker said House documents will be filed with the Justice Department in the next 10 days with the hope of winning approval in the next 30 to 45 days.

The Louisiana plans are the first of any state to hit the Department of Justice for review, Tucker said, so that could move

things along quickly.

The House is hiring a Washington, D.C., law firm that specializes in federal election, ethics, lobbying and tax laws to assist with its filing, Tucker said.

Partners of the firm, Holtzman Vogel, have strong ties to the National Republican Committee. Jill Holtzman Vogel is chief counsel of the NRC and Tom Josefiak is the past chief counsel of the committee.

How much the firm will be

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paid is not yet settled, Tucker said.

The 105-member House and 39-member Senate had to redraw their election district lines to account for population shifts since the 2000 U.S. census. The chambers had to equalize the population in each district because of federal election laws.

As it realigned districts, the House increased its number of majority-black districts from 27 to 29 and the Senate from

nine to ten.

Throughout debate, black lawmakers pushed for more legislative influence.

Smith said the approved legislative redistricting plans violate Section 2 of the Voting Rights Act. She said the caucus is consulting with members of the NAACP Legal Defense Fund.

She said it is too soon to file a lawsuit now.

"If you have a chance to draw a minority district, you should draw it as long as it doesn't dilute the voting rights of any other blacks," Smith said.

She said the Louisiana House

plan could have included a 30th majority-black district, "but they (lawmakers) chose to draw based on partisan reasons. The Senate did the same thing."

The House 30th seat would have forced two Republican lawmakers to run in the same district as it created a new black district in Shreveport.

In the Senate, how the 10th seat was created prompted questions because of the protection of two Republican incumbents, and some suggested there was an opportunity to draw another district.

Tucker said the 30th House

seat could have actually resulted in a dilution of black voter influence in the Shreveport area, creating marginal black districts, from which white candidates could win election because of stronger voter-turnout history.

"The Senate panel increases the number of minority districts in this state to an appropriate level in my view," Chaisson said.

Chaisson said the district might look funny because it protected the districts of incumbent senators, but it will pass Department of Justice scrutiny.