

Public urged to participate in redistricting process

Written by

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With population losses in Detroit and Michigan, Michigan residents can expect to lose one member of the U.S. House of Representatives because the state will lose one Congressional district. Michigan residents can expect new districts to be drawn for the U.S. House, state House and Senate and county commission seats this year once the official Census figures are released some time before April 1.

Organizers of the Michigan Redistricting Collaborative want to educate voters about the redrawing of the new districts. The collaborative hosted a forum Monday at Schoolcraft College in Livonia to inform residents about redistricting laws and how to make the redistricting process more responsive to citizens.

The collaborative is a coalition of nonprofit organizations including the Michigan Nonprofit Association, Common Cause Michigan, the League of Women Voters of Michigan, the Michigan Campaign Finance Network and The Center for Michigan.

'ONLY BITE AT THE APPLE'

Often redistricting depends on the political parties in power, some officials say.

"If there is no partisan balance in the legislature, there is no partisan balance in redistricting," said Keesha Gaskins, senior counsel for the Brennan Center for Justice in New York.

Gaskins said it was important for the public to get involved because this year's redistricting is the "only bite at the apple" for another 10 years.

For citizens to have input, they must have access to software to draft maps, contact local newspapers and testify before lawmakers. "They need to say, 'These are the communities where we live, this is what we care about, and this is what is important to us,'" Gaskins said.

Virginia Martinez, legislative staff attorney for the Mexican American Legal Defense and Educational Fund in Chicago, said

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minority representation can be diluted by drawing a line down the middle of an old district, which is called “cracking.

“Or they ‘pack’ them so they are in one or two districts when there could have been three or four,” Martinez said.

Kurt Metzger, director of Data Driven Detroit, a nonprofit established in 2009 through grants from The Skilman Foundation and the Kresge Foundation, said Michigan was the only state to lose population in the 2010 Census. That population loss means that Michigan will lose one House seat, falling to 14 seats in the U.S. House of Representatives. In 1950, that number grew to 18.

“We’ll have the fewest representatives in the state since 1920,” Metzger said.

Other states are either gaining more residents through domestic migration or immigration. Illinois lost more residents than Michigan to domestic migration, but received an influx of immigrants to offset that loss.

Metzger found that Michigan also suffered a net loss of residents to each state when domestic migration was measured between each state, except for Maine. Eight more residents moved to Michigan from Maine than those who moved to Maine from Michigan.

WAYNE COUNTY IS LOSS LEADER

Other population shifts were highlighted by Metzger:

- In Oakland County, the population grew by 110,000 between 1990 and 2000, but in

2010 it grew only by 12,000.

- Wayne County not only leads Michigan in population loss, it leads the entire nation. The county is expected to show a loss of 151,402 residents between 2000 and 2010.
- With Detroit losing residents, it is expected that districts currently in Detroit will be

redrawn southward and westward.

Michael McDonald, an associate professor of government and politics at George Mason University, directs the Midwest Mapping Project, which examined the political and racial consequences of applying redistricting criteria to Congressional and state legislative districts in Illinois, Minnesota, Ohio and Wisconsin. The project used 2000 population data to draw test plans, then evaluated them using presidential election data from that same year. McDonald said drawing “nicely shaped” districts was difficult, if not impossible, because equal population sized districts cannot be equal geographically-

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sized. "It is difficult to piece together geographically smaller urban districts with progressively geographically larger suburban rural districts," he said. Three of four types of congressional test maps favored the Democrats. All eight state Senate and state House types of maps favored the Republicans. A key to fair redistricting is how to "unpack" the concentration of Democrats living in Wayne County. "Mapping scenarios that respected county boundaries were among those consistently most favorable to Republicans," McDonald said. NEUTRAL CRITERIA ISN'T NEUTRAL Following county lines works against minority representation in the state legislature, McDonald said. With the 2000 data, it was possible to draw two additional African-American state Senate districts and 11 additional African-American state House districts by drawing districts resembling the spokes of a wheel. McDonald said it may not be possible to draw those same districts using the 2010 data. "These neutral criteria are not neutral," McDonald said. "They have political consequences; they have racial consequences." Christina Kuo, executive director of Common Cause, said the collaborative's goal was to educate the public about the redistricting process. "We're calling for more transparency," Kuo said. Kuo would like to see redistricting maps placed into the legislation that creates the new districts. Texas and Minnesota are the only states that do that currently, she said. The process

also needs reform, she said. More details to explain redistricting plans need to be revealed. "We need to find out and get an explanation (from lawmakers) on why did you pick this plan. We want something detailed to explain why you split counties," Kuo said. Transparency and openness will be the big push for the collaborative, Kuo said. Joan Gebhardt, a member of the League of Women Voters and county commissioner representing Livonia and Westland, said the league works to educate voters and redistricting was one of those issues. "People don't realize the importance of the Census," Gebhardt said, in reference to the Census impact on the new districts. Gebhardt expects that Livonia will be an interesting district because it is one of Wayne County's largest cities besides Detroit. She was uncertain as to what that might mean for her district, which includes a southern portion of Livonia and the city of Westland. "Detroit lost so much that (the districts) will be pushed out w

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est, north and south,” Gebhardt said. It is possible that districts containing Canton and Northville Township will shrink in size because those communities may have experienced population growth. “What that means for people in the middle, I don’t know,” Gebhardt said. Samantha Talbot, a Plymouth resident and a district director for State Rep. Vicki Barnett, D-Farmington, said she attended to obtain a better understanding of the redistricting process. “I think it’s important for everyone to know how it works,” Talbot said. Rosemary Doyle, a member of the League of Women Voters, said she attended to learn more about the process. “I wanted to educate myself and be an educated voice,” Doyle said.

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Zoom

“People don’t realize the importance of the Census,” said Wayne County Commissioner Joan Gebhardt (left), shown with Susan Smith, vice president of programs for the League of Women Voters of Michigan. / John Stormzand | Staff Photographer



Zoom

League of Women Voters members Rosemary Doyle of Livonia and Barbara Moorhouse of Bloomfield Township (right) attended the redistricting forum. / photos by John Stormzand | Staff Photographer

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