

Maps of possible county board district changes sparks ire

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Susan Poludniak isn't a politician. She's a regional planner.

But the two maps she drew up, which show possible Sangamon County Board districts if the number of board members is cut almost in half, might well be the innocent seed of deep political discord.

Some Democratic candidates for the county board are gathering signatures to put the cutback proposal on the fall ballot. The vote would be advisory only, however — the county board will have the final say on whether to cut its membership from 29 to 15.

Poludniak, assistant director of the Springfield-Sangamon County Regional Planning Commission, is quick to say her two maps are mere suggestions, drawn based on census data and existing precinct boundaries. She said she didn't look at which areas lean Democratic or Republican, something that's usually first on the list when politicians draw district boundaries.

"We just did it as an example, not that we think this is right or we think this is wrong," Poludniak said.

Even before they see Poludniak's maps, however, critics of the plan are seeing wrong.

"I haven't seen the proposal," said Ken Page, president of the Springfield branch of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People. "I'm against anything that reduces minority representation, period. I know that it will change the minority representation when they start re-drawing. I know that by living. I know that when people start redistricting and tinkering with things, minorities are always on the losing end of it."

Sure enough, the number of districts with a majority of African-American residents would be cut from two to one.

Poludniak said she had no choice: There is no way to create more than one black-majority district because there were not enough blacks concentrated in one area once the first district was created. Under both of Poludniak's maps, nearly 66 percent of the people living in one district would be black and the district with the next-highest number of minorities would be about 23 percent black.

Poludniak said the black-majority district she created on the east side of Springfield was the first one drawn.

And that's a good way to do it, said Kent Redfield, a political science professor at the University of Illinois at Springfield.

Under federal law, new election maps can't discriminate against minorities or dilute minority representation on elected bodies, Redfield said.

"You don't want to end up with something that's unconstitutional to begin with," Redfield said. "They can screw around all they want in terms of advantaging or disadvantaging Republicans."

Under both maps, the number of rural districts would shrink from 10 to four. Mark Reichert, president of the Sangamon County Farm Bureau, said he hasn't had time to study the maps, but what he's seen so far confirms his group's opposition to the board-reduction proposal.

"We're losing representation," Reichert said.

Reichert and other opponents of the ballot measure dismiss arguments that a reduction in the number of rural and minority districts would be offset by the fact that the proportion of rural and minority districts to urban, white districts would stay roughly the same.

"When you've got two votes, that's better than one vote," said Frank McNeil, a former board member who went on to become a Springfield alderman. "One vote makes a difference, sometimes."

Reichert likened the proposal to state government, where a handful of elected officials call the shots.

"You've got the power of state government in the hands of about five people, and you can see how dysfunctional that is," Reichert said. "With 15 county board members, it will only take eight to get an initiative through.

"If it's not broke, don't fix it. We've got good government now."

Not so, says Michael Hoerner, one of the Democrats who is pushing the idea of reducing the number of board members.

The board has so many members that none are held accountable for missteps, such as purchasing substandard voting machines or not saying anything at all when the Springfield Metro Sanitary Board tried hiking sewer rates, Hoerner said.

"They just sit back and do nothing," Hoerner said. "Where's the representation there?"

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