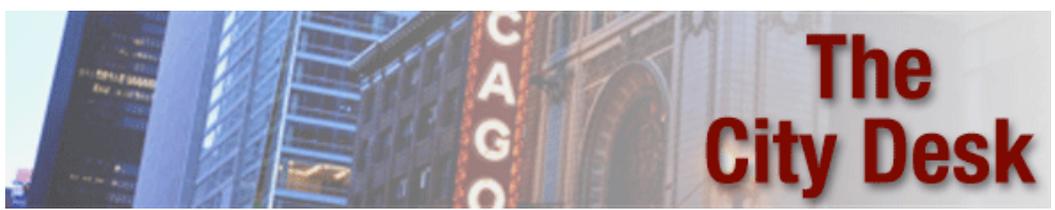




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Lawmakers, advocates gearing up for redistricting battle

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- By Andrea Zelinski
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Every 10 years, Illinois lawmakers bust out their markers and redraw the lines that make up the state's legislative districts.

The process is called redistricting, and it's guaranteed to produce some serious political strife during the year to come.

"Redistricting, to me, is the root of all evil," says Sen. Kirk Dillard, a Hinsdale Republican running for governor.

After the 2010 U.S. Census, state lawmakers will use the new population data to redraw the legislative districts. Where those lines end up can have a lasting effect on political parties at the state and national level for the balance of the decade.

As is, Illinois Democrats control both lawmaking branches of state government, which includes the ability to approve or deny redrawn maps. That means Republicans and others who want to shake up the system have a tough fight ahead.

It's a battle made more difficult by the fact that the only way to change the redistricting process is with a state constitutional amendment. Such amendments can make it onto the ballot via a petition with roughly 500,000 signatures, or by a three-fifths vote of the Legislature.

Despite that, there are efforts afoot to change the way the redistricting process works.

Lawmakers say they're seriously considering several bills, but none are perfect. It could take months before enough members get close to agreeing on a bill.

Meanwhile, a pack of good government groups are rallying voters to sign petitions in an effort to strip the magic markers out of lawmakers' hands — and give the drawing power to an independent commission. Headed by the League of Women Voters, the Better Government Association and former members of the Illinois Reform Commission, the coalition is asking 500,000 voters to sign petitions to post what they call the Illinois Fair Act Amendment on the 2010 election ballot.

The amendment would also:

- I require public hearings on redistricting;

- I ensure that districts follow municipal and natural boundaries;

- I mandate that the redistricting process not discriminate against particular political parties and other groups.

Reform Commission member Brad McMillan says there's a three-fold method to limiting the influence politics has on redistricting: have someone who's not in office draw the lines, ignore where current incumbents live and try to ignore voting trends.

"We don't claim this is the perfect solution. We do believe the system is seriously flawed," McMillan said to legislators in October.

The commission pointed the finger at political operatives from both parties, saying they will secretly scrutinize the voting history of constituents in order to draw "safe" districts for incumbents, leading to gerrymandering and worming the lines around neighborhoods and regions.

Meanwhile, Republicans, who are drastically outnumbered in both houses, are looking for ways to create maps with computer software. The result would be box-like districts that they say will better represent an area. That approach would also limit the ability of Democratic lawmakers to stick Republicans with difficult districts.

"If you allow incumbent legislators to draw their own lines, inherent to that process is going to be self-protection," says Sen. Dale Righter, Republican spokesman of the Redistricting Committee.

Democrats, who are in the majority, generally want lawmakers to draw the map themselves.

“Machines are only as good as the men and women who use them,” says Sen. Kwame Raoul, the Chicago Democrat who chairs the Senate Redistricting Committee.

Under the current system, any map drawn needs to be approved by both chambers and the governor’s office. According to the Illinois Constitution, districts must be contiguous – without gaps – and compact.

Some districts seemingly bend that rule. The 17th Congressional district snakes from the Quad Cities, along the Mississippi River short of St. Louis, then across to Springfield and on further east to Decatur.

“God does not design in rectangles,” said Sen. Don Harmon, an Oak Park Democrat. He says there are too many factors at risk to let a computer arrange districts blindly.

Districts that lean up against state borders have common interests, he said, like people migrating to other states to pay cheaper taxes or to buy up less expensive cigarettes.

While each district will be redrawn, the population makeup of some areas is changing faster than others.

When the lines were last redrawn, each U.S. congressional district had roughly 650,000 people in it.

But the south and west suburbs have grown, according to U.S. Census estimates released in October. The 14th Congressional District that stretches from Kane County just short of the Mississippi River now has roughly 803,000 people.

More people have moved to the south suburban and downstate districts, too. The 11th District, stretching from the Indiana border at Kankakee County to the west of Starved Rock, now has 750,000 people. And the 13th District, coupling parts of DuPage, Kendall and Cook counties, is home to 775,000 people.

Meanwhile, the 4th Congressional District, which includes areas like Bucktown and Cicero, is shrinking. It now has about 599,000 people.

To throw in another complication that could change how the map shakes out, the state could lose a congressional seat if the population drops too low by the 2010 Census.

If Illinois loses a seat, lawmakers could try to throw a new or unpopular congressman under the bus by pinning him or her in a district with a long-time incumbent.

Retaining that power is going to be a focus for Democrats, says Kent Redfield, a longtime political observer and political science professor at the University of Illinois at Springfield.

“At the moment, the Democrats hold all the cards,” he says. “I don’t think there’s any way in the world the Democrats are going to do anything to change the constitution before the next map.”

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