

MINUTES OF CITIZENS ADVISORY PANEL: February 19, 2011

Members present: State Senator Curt Thompson (*presiding*), Louise Johnson (COS), and all other attendees are listed on the sign in sheet.

Opening Remarks:

Curt welcomed everyone in attendance. Before introducing our guest speaker, Curt commented that this session of the General Assembly has the lowest number of bills introduced on record. The process of redistricting is not in the works now because not all 2010 Census data is yet in a format to use for mapping. The full complete Census data will be released in April/May.

Announcements:

None

Meeting Topic:

The Democratic legislators' point person in the redistricting strategy for the Georgia State Senate is, Senator Jason Carter. Specializing in Elections Law, Carter's State Senate District 42 encompasses all of downtown Decatur and spans the portion of DeKalb County to the Buford Hwy & Clairmont Rd intersection.

Nationwide, redistricting will be an interesting process because, for the first time since 1930, the state of California will not be gaining at least one Congressional seat. Preliminary Census population data indicates that the state of New York will be losing seats and that Florida will be gaining seats, New York and Florida will very soon have equal impact in the Electoral College. In fact, if the popular vote totals by states from the last Presidential election would be translated into the upcoming new Electoral College, Obama would lose six electoral votes and McCain would gain electoral votes.

Georgia is one of those states that must comply with the Voting Rights Act and its final redistricted map must pass muster with the U.S. Department of Justice. We are not allowed to be regressive in order to reduce the influence of racial block voting. In the recent past, our maps have drawn the attention of the Justice Department when the practice of drawing multi-member districts was still done, and when a Congressional district was drawn to include both the cities of Savannah and Athens—hardly considered as sister cities.

Before the era of computer mapping, great deviations of population totals were tolerated in the past. It was not unusual for urban senate districts to average 250,000 constituents versus rural districts in South Georgia to average 15,000 each. That can no longer happen. All state house districts must have as equal number of constituents as possible. The same applies to state senate districts. The district lines are expected to do a good deal of moving, too, because some current districts have grown in population by as much as 35% since 2000. One state senate district will be lost in South Georgia and its replacement must be wedged somewhere into a north metro-Atlanta region.

Georgia may be a test case of the Voting Rights Act this year, and it's going to be a race to the U.S. Supreme Court between parties seeking remedial actions, so that they can then fight on their own defined terms and shape the oral arguments of the justices. Democrats in the past wanted unfettered redistricting without any regard to racial lines; whereas, Republicans now want unfettered redistricting with blatant regard to partisan lines.

There is little correlation between the popular vote percentages in the last Presidential Election and the partisan make-up of our Congressional delegation. Witness the 48.5% of the popular votes going to Obama (leaving 51.5% for McCain) versus the 10 R: 4 D split in our Congressional delegation.

Past practices of redrawing the maps simply involved 3 or 4 legislators with the help from lobbyists. Georgia is not among those 11 states that have independent commissions drawing the district lines with a lot less acrimonious receptions and a great deal more politically moderate incumbents.

Georgia state senate has 56 members—36 are Republican, and 20 are Democrat. It only takes a vote from 19 Republican senators to bring any bill from committee to the floor. For a constitutional majority, however, the entire Republican caucus needs just two Democratic votes to embed anything into the state constitution with a two-thirds supermajority vote on the floor

Gerrymandering in Georgia has been done with such skill in the past, that there are really only two state senate seats that may be considered as competitive in elections. All the other 54 senate seats are considered either safely Republican or safely Democratic.

Our next monthly CAF meeting is on Saturday, March 19th, 2011 at 10:30 a.m. in Café 45 South, in Norcross.

Minutes Recorded by
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