

**From the Virginia Redistricting Coalition
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Prepare to gerrymander

P&E committees cross Gov. McDonnell, local government and public input

The General Assembly's redistricting committees approved rules Friday that contradict the criteria set by Gov. Bob McDonnell, foil the aims of Virginia's cities and counties and shut down an important discussion even before their public hearings begin.

By adopting rules that require new House and Senate districts to be closer in population than the law requires, the committees effectively guarantee that, for the next 10 years, General Assembly districts will confusingly criss-cross existing city and county boundaries even more than they do today.

"Virginia's political map is already a misshapen maze," said Richmond business leader E. Bryson Powell, a member of the non-partisan Virginia Redistricting Coalition, which advocates redistricting reform. "These population limits will give the incumbents an excuse to ignore city and county boundaries so they can cherry-pick voters and build safe, partisan districts based on previous election results."

"They've greased the skids with those population rules," said C. Douglas Smith, director of the Virginia Interfaith Center for Public Policy and chairman of the Virginia Redistricting Coalition. "Gerrymandering is now on a fast track."

Though the courts allow General Assembly districts to differ in population by +/- 5 percent to reflect existing communities of interest, natural boundaries and other legitimate concerns, the House Privileges & Elections Committee set a limit of +/- 1 percent. The Senate P&E Committee set a limit of +/- 2 percent.

Reducing the population flexibility ensures that cities and counties will be more fragmented among General Assembly districts, according to the experts working with the Independent Bipartisan Advisory Commission on Redistricting created by Gov. McDonnell.

"The result will be a jigsaw puzzle of uncompetitive House and Senate districts drawn without regard to neighborhoods and communities of interest," said Olga Hernandez, president of the League of Women Voters of Virginia, a member of the Coalition. "And they'll rationalize their gerrymandering in the name of 'one person, one vote.'"

In its open meetings, the Bipartisan Advisory Commission has examined potential redistricting maps that demonstrate that effect at various population differences.

- The Commission's experts said the current state Senate district map, at the +/-2 percent deviation set in 2001, divides cities and counties 110 times. Their sample map, at a difference of +/-3 percent, required 41 such divisions (62 percent fewer).

- The experts said the current House of Delegates district map, at the +/-2 percent deviation set 10 years ago, divides cities and counties 194 times. Their sample map at a difference of +/-3 percent, required 157 divisions (20 percent fewer).

When he created the Advisory Commission on Redistricting, Gov. McDonnell set out five criteria. Number 4 reads: “All districts, to the extent practicable, shall respect the boundary lines of existing political subdivisions. The number of counties and cities divided among multiple districts shall be as few as practicable.” (Executive Order 31, Jan. 10, 2011)

In the Advisory Commission’s public forums around the state this month, citizens and local government leaders repeatedly said the new districts should respect existing local boundaries, so that districts would be easier to understand, city and county interests would not be diluted and voters could have easier access to their representatives and hold them more accountable.

The Senate and House P&E Committees will hear from the public at joint hearings that begin Tuesday (March 29), but their rules on population differences shut the door on those comments.

The Virginia Redistricting Coalition is a statewide group of organizations and individuals who advocate bipartisan redistricting reform.

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