

Redistricting Coalition members challenge Saslaw on gerrymandering comments

Virginia Redistricting Coalition

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In a radio interview Friday, Senate Majority Leader Richard Saslaw made it clear he intends to gerrymander new Senate districts to give his party an advantage in elections for the next 10 years.

"If I lose a few seats as a result of redistricting, and I'm in the majority, I'm not doing a very good job," he said in an interview on WAMU radio. "Our goal is to make the Democratic districts, particularly the marginal ones, a little bit better than they are now." (WAMU podcast; Washington Post Virginia Politics blog, March 4)

Members of the non-partisan Virginia Redistricting Coalition called on Saslaw and the General Assembly to put aside "cynical politics as usual" and give serious consideration to the non-partisan district maps that will be presented by the Independent Bipartisan Commission on Redistricting and by the Virginia College and University Redistricting Competition. The work of the Commission and the student teams will be presented before the Assembly reconvenes to redraw Virginia's political map in April.

League of Women Voters of Virginia President Olga Hernandez, a member of the Coalition, reacted this way: "I compliment Sen. Saslaw for his frankness, for saying out loud that the legislators' private agenda is exactly as partisan and self-serving as critics believe. But the people of Virginia deserve better. They deserve fair, sensible, impartially drawn political districts that don't undermine voters by gerrymandering the state into uncompetitive districts in which the results are deliberately tilted to one party or the other."

Hernandez continued: "The Independent Bipartisan Advisory Commission and the Virginia College Redistricting Competition are going to put plans on the table that aren't gerrymandered. We would hope the legislators of both parties in both houses take this citizen input seriously and use the material to provide voters a real choice at the polls."

She can be reached at LWV-VA@cox.net.

Business and civic leader James E. Ukrop, another member of the Redistricting Coalition, said, "Sen. Saslaw let the cat out of the bag in that radio interview: It's politics as usual – another cynical round of gerrymandering. That's disappointing, especially because we have alternatives to politics as usual. For the first time in Virginia's history, we have a bipartisan advisory commission that's going to present a redistricting plan that's sensible and impartial. And we have student teams at 13 Virginia colleges who will deliver other non-partisan plans for our seats in the House, Senate and Congress. Their work – and the idea that votes count – shouldn't be hijacked by blatant, self-serving partisanship."

He can be reached at jim.ukrop@ukrops.com.

"Sen. Saslaw says he won't be much of a leader unless he can gerrymander the Senate districts to favor his party's candidates," said John Stone, a member of the Board of Directors of The Future of Hampton Roads, Inc., a member organization of the Coalition. "He's saying that the legislators are going to pick their voters, rather than let the voters pick their legislators. That's backwards. The Bipartisan Advisory Commission is going to present the Assembly with a redistricting plan that's not gerrymandered, and voters ought to demand that it get full and fair consideration. They ought to demand districts in which their votes count."

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