

Redistricting Reform Heats Up

By Sara Fitzgerald, LWVFC, Member LWVUS Redistricting Task Force

Redistricting reform is heating up as an issue in Virginia, thanks to a federal court's decision that the boundaries of the 3rd Congressional District, represented by Democratic Rep. Bobby Scott, were unconstitutional because the Virginia General Assembly had tried to pack as many African-Americans as possible into the district around Richmond.

Despite meeting briefly in a special session in August, the General Assembly failed to meet a September 1 deadline for redrawing the district, as specified by a three-judge panel of the U.S. Court of Appeals for the 4th Circuit. After the deadline passed, the co-presidents of the Virginia League of Women Voters published an op-ed in several newspapers around the state, urging the judges to use as a starting point one of the maps that were prepared in 2011 by independent groups, such as then-Gov. Bob McDonnell's bipartisan redistricting advisory commission or the winning teams from a competition among Virginia colleges.

Since then, the judges have appointed Bernard Grofman, a political science professor at the University of California at Irvine and an expert on redistricting, as special master to recommend a map to the court. Ten maps are currently under consideration. The maps and related documents can be reviewed at <http://redistricting.dls.virginia.gov/2010/court-ordered-redistricting.aspx>. The current schedule calls for the special master to propose his plan by October 30 and then to receive and review comments so that the court can adopt a new plan "at the earliest practical opportunity after November 17." Redrawing the boundaries of the 3rd District will necessarily change the boundaries of other districts, but it is unknown how extensive the changes will be. In September, good-government advocates pushed back at efforts by the Democratic plaintiffs in the case to keep maps that were under consideration from public view and comment.

Another lawsuit, challenging several state legislative districts using the same arguments that were successful in this case, is still pending in federal court.

Meanwhile, on September 15, OneVirginia2021, the bipartisan coalition working for redistricting reform in the state, filed a lawsuit, challenging the boundaries of 11 Senate and House districts, held by both Democrats and Republicans, contending that they failed to meet the Virginia Constitutional requirement for compactness. Former Republican State Rep. Wyatt Durette is serving as attorney for the suit, brought on behalf of individual residents of the 11 districts, included from all parts of the state. League members, acting as individuals, are among those involved in the suit.

Members of the Falls Church League were among those who attended an October 7 forum, "Redistricting Reform: Mapping Our Future," sponsored by Common Cause and the George Washington University Law School. Chris Carson, chair of the national League's redistricting task force, moderated one of the program's panels.

10/5/2015