



Local delegates blast state redistricting efforts

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Waldorf, MD -- Southern Maryland's Republican state legislators have called for reform of the state's redistricting process. The legislators testified at a Sept. 29 public meeting in Waldorf of the Maryland Redistricting Reform Commission established by Gov. Larry Hogan.

The testimony from the four delegates came after a presentation by St. Mary's College Associate Professor of Political Science and Public Policy Todd Eberly, who blasted Maryland's system and called for reform along the lines of what is done in California, which has an independent commission draw up district boundaries. He said of Marylanders: "As Americans we should be demanding better."

Currently the Democratic majority legislature draws the district boundaries. Eberly said the lack of guidelines in Maryland for the creation of districts is the major problem with the system. Republicans contend the Democrats have created gerrymandered districts to benefit their party. Eberly conceded that point saying each party "shares the same goal – acquisition of power."

Eberly said the political center is gone in this country, with politics being taken over by the right and left.

Del. Tony O'Donnell [R; 29-C] presented three proposals for reform: an independent commission to create districts, single legislative districts for the state legislature, and compact and contiguous districts. "These three simple reforms could make Maryland a national leader," O'Donnell said.

Charles County has one legislative district (28) with three delegates running at large. That system came under fire by several speakers. Delegate Mark Fisher [R-27-C] noted the distinct difference between the urban and rural areas of Charles County. He said he, as a representative of Calvert County, was receiving calls from Charles County residents concerned about the erosion of their property rights. He said it was an issue that the three Charles delegates were not tuned into.

Fisher (shown) proposes carving Charles into three single-delegate legislative districts, with two serving the urban areas north of Billingsley Road, and the third serving the rest of the county's more rural areas.

Delegate Matt Morgan [R - 29A] used to live in Charles County but moved to St. Mary's when Hughesville and Benedict were removed from the former district of Delegate John Wood, who retired last year. Morgan said those areas in Charles County more properly belong with the northern St. Mary's district instead of being put into districts in Charles and Prince George's counties.

Delegate Deb Rey [R - 29B] argued that the congressional legislative districts should be compact, with counties split into no more than two districts instead of the four which occurred during the last redistricting round.

Rey also said the state legislative districts were drawn around then Delegate Bohanan's house to protect his district. Rey defeated the incumbent Bohanan in the last election.

The Redistricting Reform Commission is bipartisan. Southern Maryland State Senator Steve Waugh [R - 29] sits on the panel. Co-chairs are Walter Olson from Frederick County, a senior fellow with the Cato Institute, and Alexander Williams, Jr. of Prince George's County, a retired U.S. District Court judge.

During the Waldorf hearing the contention that the rural areas were being ignored was challenged by Senator Joan Carter Conway of Baltimore City, who was selected to the commission by Senate President Mike Miller of Calvert County. Conway said the urban areas often feel like their voice isn't being heard either.

Also speaking during the meeting was former Charles County Commissioner Rueben Collins, who urged the panel to take into consideration the concerns of the minority population. He did call for an independent redistricting commission to do the job and also agreed that "to some degree" there was a difference in needs between the urban and rural areas of Charles County.

Ella Ennis, member of the Calvert County Republican Central Committee, looked at the two redistricting maps at the front of the audience (state legislature and congressional) and said, "You can see why we are considered the most gerrymandered state in the nation." She said to get from the Calvert County side of District 27-B to the Prince George's County side one had to drive through two other districts first, "or swim over the river."

None of the three Democratic Charles County delegates spoke at the hearing.

The commission is holding hearings around the state. According to Gov. Hogan's executive order the commission must make a report to the governor, Senate president and speaker of the House no later than Nov. 3 of this year.