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## Gov. Hogan to propose redistricting reform

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Gov. Larry Hogan is scheduled to introduce a bill Wednesday to overhaul the state's process for drawing voting districts, largely in line with recommendations from a commission he convened over the summer.

Hogan's administration will propose a nonpartisan Apportionment Commission to replace the current, governor-led redistricting process.

The bill was announced Tuesday and could be formally presented to the General Assembly on Wednesday morning.

The redistricting reform would require an amendment to the state constitution, which must pass with a three-fifths vote from the General Assembly, followed by a majority vote of Maryland voters.

The proposal will be based on recommendations from the governor's bipartisan Redistricting Reform Commission, his office said.

New Market resident Walter Olson, who was co-chairman of the commission, said a draft version of the bill he has seen tracked closely with the group's recommendations, which were released in November.

"By and large, most of the important substance, I think they took our recommendations," Olson said.

After each decennial U.S. Census, Maryland redraws both the congressional and legislative voting district lines. Under current law, the governor creates the maps, which must then be changed or accepted by the General Assembly.

The new commission would open up that process by appointing a citizen board to create the maps and allowing the public to introduce their own versions.

"Everything changes when the public can participate in the creation of the maps," Olson said. The collaborative process has worked in other states and creates an overall better product, he said.

Through the process, the district boundaries would focus on factors like compactness and respect for political subdivisions, such as counties and municipalities.

The commission also recommended a focus on ensuring that districts are more uniform in size. District populations now can include up to 5 percent more or less voters than a target, creating a 10-point possible spread and the possibility for gerrymandering, or politically based carving of districts. The commission recommended that districts can vary only up to 1 percent above or below the target.

Olson said those recommendations were in a draft copy of the bill he'd reviewed. A final copy of the bill was not released by the governor's office Tuesday.

Organizations such as Common Cause have supported the reform effort. But some Democratic leaders have questioned the commission's recommendations, arguing that reforms should start at a national — not state — level.

In the last round of legislative redistricting, which took effect in 2012, Frederick County boundaries became more compact. District 3 was changed to cover a more condensed area, including the city of Frederick, and down to the county line. District 4 was changed to include a smaller sliver of Carroll County than was included in the district previously.

The congressional districts in the county, however, changed dramatically. In the federal redistricting of 2011, Frederick County was split as part of a shift that made the 6th District more Democratic. The Democratic-oriented city of Frederick is part of the reworked 6th District, which also picked up part of heavily Democratic Montgomery County. Other parts of Frederick County were moved to the 8th District.

Maryland has some of the most politically drawn districts in the U.S., according to the commission's report. District 6 is considered a prime example. In 2012, after redistricting, Republican Rep. Roscoe Bartlett, District 6, was unseated by Rep. John Delaney, a Montgomery County Democrat.

While Democrats benefit from much of the gerrymandering in Maryland, Democratic leaders say that in Congress as a whole, Republicans benefit more. Democrats hold the majority in both state chambers, but are a minority in Congress.

Hogan's office said partisanship is the reason a majority of Marylanders support redistricting reform.

"For too long, fair elections and a healthy, strong, and competitive two-party system have been nearly impossible in our state," the governor said in a statement released Tuesday. "This is about recognizing a problem and choosing to do the right thing to solve it."

Olson said the bill — which he called "strong medicine" — will likely meet some resistance in the State House.

"Now, it's up to the Legislature," he said. "Do they do the right thing, even though some of their leadership might be upset?"