



## **Md. redistricting panel hears gerrymandering complaints**

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For roughly two hours Monday, 10 members of the new Maryland Redistricting Reform Commission listened to voters and elected officials alike vent about the state's congressional and legislative district maps.

Speakers told them they felt disenfranchised and distressed. They said their voices had been silenced, and their views weren't represented.

"They're frustrated and apathetic," former district court judge and commission co-chairman Alexander Williams Jr. concluded after the hearing. "People want something done."

Monday's hearing, conducted at Hagerstown Community College, was the second in a series the 11-member panel is holding across the state.

Established by Gov. Larry Hogan last month, the commission must issue a report on its findings to the governor, Senate President Thomas V. "Mike" Miller and House Speaker Michael E. Busch by Nov. 3.

Ultimately, the commission is to make recommendations for a constitutional amendment on redistricting for the Maryland General Assembly to consider next year.

Christopher Bouchat, an unsuccessful candidate last year for the Maryland House of Delegates from Carroll County, told the panel he is currently a plaintiff in a lawsuit against the state over "voter disenfranchisement."

Bouchat said his legislative district crosses into Howard County. He won in his county, but was less well known in Howard, he said.

Bochat contended that the current map, with cross-county districts, disenfranchises voters in individual jurisdictions. He recommended having the lines drawn by a convention of delegates, three from each county, that meets after new census figures are compiled.

Several speakers, including three Washington County legislators, also addressed state legislative districts, most saying all state House districts should have only one member.

One of the county's districts was converted to a two-member district in the current map.

Legislators "need to be close to the people," said Sen. Andrew Serafini, R-Washington, who ran for re-election to the House of Delegates last year in that district.

Larger, multimember districts make that more difficult, he said.

Del. Brett Wilson, R-Washington, called multimember districts "one of the greatest political crimes in Maryland right now."

But most of the speakers complained about the congressional map.

The Rev. Randy Buchman, former chairman of the Washington County Republican Central Committee, likened part of the 6th Congressional District — which includes all of Washington, Allegany and Garrett counties, and parts of Frederick and Montgomery counties — to "the head of the Grinch."

But Buchman said he believed a better description would be "the head of a donkey that stole away the 6th District."

"That image of the head of the Grinch is not one that I'll be able to get out of my head," replied commission Co-chairman Walter Olson.

### **Politically engineered**

Cultural differences separate the interests of Western Maryland and Montgomery County, Ginger Bigelow, president of the Washington Republican Club, told the panel.

"We have four counties out here that have nothing to do with Montgomery County," she said.

She contended that Republicans lost the last congressional race because "we can't fight that Montgomery County machine."

And Republicans weren't the only ones who said the boundaries were politically engineered.

Former Frederick County Commissioner Kai Hagen, a Democrat, said "my district isn't the district it should be."

Hagen said districts have become more polarized as many have gone from more evenly balanced to 70 percent or more voters in one party or the other.

"Gerrymandering is a major reason," he said.

"We know what's wrong with it," Hagen said. "It's an exercise of pure political power over common sense and fairness. We have to fix it."

The commission will conduct several more hearings.

Although Miller has said no resulting legislation will get through the General Assembly in 2016, local legislators say it's time to get the discussion going.

Ideas can take years to generate action, said Wilson, who wasn't deterred by Miller's opposition.

"The fact that its obituary was written before it was born doesn't bother me," he said.

"Why do we have apathy? With respect to Sen. Miller, saying there's a foregone conclusion" doesn't help, Serafini said.

But Del. Neil Parrot said he was encouraged.

"I'm hearing most of the panel wants to listen," he said.