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Official: Md. redistricting bill to return

Tamela Baker

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Lawmakers passed 835 bills during the recently concluded session of the Maryland General Assembly.

But one issue that got a lot of attention during a statewide series of hearings last year got nowhere in Annapolis: a plan to change the way congressional and legislative district lines are drawn.

That's no surprise, according to Walter Olson, co-chairman of Gov. Larry Hogan's Redistricting Reform Commission.

Olson told the Hagerstown Rotary Club on Wednesday that Maryland's political leaders had the district lines drawn "so they could win."

Not only that, the commission found that control of district maps is one way legislative leaders — and in Maryland, they are all Democrats — maintain control over lawmakers from their own party.

But Olson said the bill that resulted from the commission's recommendations will be back next year and possibly again after that in the hopes of getting the method changed.

The bill would have put the 10-year redistricting plan in the hands of an independent commission composed of equal numbers of Democrats, Republicans and members of neither major party.

Currently, the sitting governor following the 10-year census submits a district map to the legislature. The map in use now was submitted by former Gov. Martin O'Malley and approved by the General Assembly in 2011.

The congressional districts outlined in the map resulted in a lawsuit and an unsuccessful voter referendum spearheaded by Del. Neil Parrott, R-Washington.

It also earned Maryland the distinction of being one of the two most gerrymandered states in the nation, Olson said.

But now that North Carolina's map has been struck down by the courts, "we're No. 1," he said.

And not without reason.

Maryland's 3rd Congressional District has been described as everything from an inkblot, a blood splatter and a rabbit after a blast from a shotgun, to "a Rorschach-like eyesore" and "a broken-winged pterodactyl, lying prostrate across the center of the State."

In fact, it might be "the single most gerrymandered district in the country," Olson said.

Other districts didn't fare much better, in his estimation.

"The 4th District you could compare to a pair of earmuffs," he said.

And Olson described the 8th Congressional District, where he resides, as a "tornado."

The 6th Congressional District, which includes Washington County, was drawn to unseat former U.S. Rep. Roscoe Bartlett, he said.

Such gerrymandering harms the minority party, "and that can be turned in either direction," he said.

While Maryland's map favors Democrats, other states' districts favor Republicans.

It also makes unseating an incumbent much more expensive and difficult because districts that cover a varied swath of the state favor "those who already have a political machine in place" and make grassroots appeal more difficult, Olson said.

Although he acknowledged that there is little reason for the Democratic leadership in Annapolis to give up its power over redistricting, Olson hopes a new system will eventually emerge.

"It takes years to get serious ideas to be taken seriously by the General Assembly," he said, predicting the issue would get more attention as the end of the current four-year legislative term approaches in 2018.