



Md. redistricting panel considers ‘bold plan’ while others want delay

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ANNAPOLIS — Maryland could move to an independent panel that would redraw congressional and legislative districts every 10 years and revamp guideline for how those lines are drawn.

But while some members of the governor’s Redistricting Reform Commission say there is an opportunity to draft a bold proposal, other members, saying the commission was designed to yield a predictable result in just 60 days, want additional time.

“Pretty much everyone agrees there needs to be some reform,” said retired United States District Judge Alexander Williams, who co-chairs the panel. “I didn’t hear from anyone who said the process needs to remain as is.”

Among the potential recommendations are the creation of an independent commission to redraw districts and the establishment of guidelines for both legislative and congressional districts. A number of members said they would like a plan that would establish rules to keep congressional districts compact and contiguous, much like the requirement on state districts, and to set rules for the use of single-member legislative districts.

Most legislative districts are three-member House of Delegate districts, but single-member districts are often used to protect incumbents. For instance, in Baltimore County a single-member district was drawn to protect Del. Steve Lafferty. That technique also is used to pack large numbers of Democratic or Republican voters into one area.

“We have such a unique opportunity here to do something very, very bold and very, very important,” said Christopher Summers a commission member and president of the Maryland Public Policy Institute.

Summers said the commission could draft a plan that makes Maryland a model on redistricting reform.

“With this opportunity, I do hope we set up a system that’s very bold and unique,” Summers said.

Another potential recommendation could revamp the standard that allows for district populations to stray from targets by as much as 5 percent either way, creating a swings of as much as 10 percent.

“I feel strongly that the 10 percent margin has been misused so much we just have to crack down on it,” said Walter Olson, co-chairman of the commission and a senior fellow at the Cato Institute.

But not all of the members are in agreement. Some are already saying that recommendations will be a nonstarter if they reach the legislature.

“You’re going to have a difficult time getting a constitutional amendment through the legislature if it has an independent commission in it,” said Sen. Joan Carter Conway, D-Baltimore City and chairwoman of the Senate Education, Health and Environmental Affairs Committee. “I don’t know a lot, but I do know how to count. I can count.”

Any legislation resulting from recommendations made by the commission will have to pass through the committee Carter Conway chairs.

Hogan created the commission months after promising reform in his State of the State Speech.

Maryland has been criticized for having some of the most gerrymandered congressional districts in the country as a result of the involvement of the governor and legislature in crafting the new districts every decade.

The 3rd Congressional district, represented by Rep. John Sarbanes, as a particularly offensive example with it sometimes being referred to as “the pinwheel of death” a “Rorschach ink blot test” or “blood spatter at a crime scene” or “broken-winged pterodactyl, lying prostrate across the center of the center of the state.”

The commission has held five meetings since being created by Gov. Larry Hogan this summer. Members of the commission argued about the number of people who attended, with some saying 500 statewide and others, like Carter Conway and Del. Alonzo Washington, saying it was much less and that the meetings were held outside urban areas and lacked diversity.

“We didn’t go to Montgomery County, we didn’t go to Baltimore City, we barely went to Prince George’s County,” said Washington, adding that “mostly white Republicans came out to these meetings.”

“If we want to come up with a bold plan, it seems we’re being rushed to come up with a plan that will be in our state for a very long time,” Washington said.

The panel is expected to deliver a report with final recommendations by Nov. 3 that would then be used as a guide to draft legislation. Any changes to the Maryland Constitution would require support from a super majority of House and Senate and then need voter approval, possibly as soon as 2016.

The commission is scheduled to continue through November 2016.

“If we are going to make recommendations for reform, that requires a constitutional amendment and we have to put it on the ballot,” said Patrick N. Hogan, deputy legislative officer for Gov. Hogan. “I don’t think the intention was to quickly throw something out there and have the commission go away.”

Carter Conway said a delay in delivering the report might be needed.

“I just don’t think from this meeting to the next meeting that we’re going to meet the deadline,” Carter Conway said, urging the panel to ask Hogan for more time. “You can extend the date.”