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Commission picks new map for Maryland's gerrymandered 6th District

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A nonpartisan commission charged with redrawing Maryland's 6th Congressional District, which a court ruled was unconstitutional, has proposed new boundaries for the sprawling district.

The Governor's Emergency Commission on Sixth Congressional District Gerrymandering on Friday decided on a map that would unite all of Frederick County within the 6th district, while neatly bisecting Montgomery County between Gaithersburg and Germantown.

"It kept the communities together," Luis T. Gutierrez, Jr., a Democrat from Montgomery County on the commission, said after the meeting. "It makes both districts as compact as they can be."

Maury S. Epner, a Montgomery County Republican also on the commission, said it wasn't "a perfect solution," but it did the job.

"There's no crazy quilt line drawing that squiggles all around to try and capture people by party registration," he said.

The district was last redrawn in 2011, when Democratic mapmakers added more liberal voters from Montgomery County and moved out more conservative voters from Western Maryland.

That prompted Republican voters to file suit, arguing that conservatives had been intentionally excluded, violating their First Amendment right to political association.

In November, a three-judge panel agreed that the 6th District had been gerrymandered, ordering it be redrawn before the 2020 election. Gov. Larry Hogan (R) that month created the commission — which includes equal numbers of Democrats, Republicans and independent voters — to recommend new boundaries.

After the meeting Friday, two of the nine commissioners resigned. They were unaffiliated voters from Montgomery and Howard counties. A spokeswoman for Hogan said the two were ineligible to serve, but the commission would still have seven members for a quorum.

The map selected was submitted by Stephen Wolf, who writes about redistricting for the liberal politics blog Daily Kos. Wolf, who is based in Oregon, described how he arrived at the map's boundaries in a [Feb. 26 blog post](#), noting he relied on "nonpartisan criteria."

"Our proposal aimed to increase compactness and minimize the number of divided cities and counties while altering as little of the map as feasible to comply with the court's ruling," Wolf wrote in an email Friday.

That Wolf isn't from Maryland wasn't an issue for the commission, said Walter Olson, one of the commission's co-chairs.

“If it’s a good map it shouldn’t matter,” Olson said. “The idea is to find a good map rather than say you have to be a Maryland resident.”

Wolf’s map was one of about two dozen submitted by the public and others on the commission’s website, which featured an online tool that allowed would-be cartographers to design their ideal 6th District.

As it turns out, drawing a new district is tougher than it looks.

Each congressional district in the state must contain 721,529 people — the population of Maryland as determined by the 2010 Census, divided by eight, minus prisoners, whom state law counts as residents of their home jurisdictions.

Olson, who had never drawn a map before, decided to try his hand, submitting two versions that restored Frederick County and part of Carroll County to the 6th District, while including the northern half of Montgomery.

“It was like trying to ride a bicycle for the first time,” Olson said. “I had tried for hours and then I looked at it and it just looked so jagged. I knew in concept what I wanted to do, but it still looked like a very badly frosted cake.”

He said he was “pleased” with the map the commission ultimately chose.

“Between Germantown and Gaithersburg was a logical line,” Olson said.

Some who submitted maps to the commission took the opportunity to redraw all eight Maryland districts — including the current tortured boundaries of the 3rd, which former Montgomery County council member Phil Andrews once likened to “blood spatter from a crime scene.”

But while there’s no way to draw a new 6th District without affecting the boundaries of at least one other one, Olson said the commission decided to keep its fiddling confined to the 6th and 8th.

“Don’t improve other districts for sake of improving other districts, because that’s not what we were asked to do,” Olson said.

Instead, the commission hewed to a few principles. Try not to split counties or municipalities. Follow rivers or other natural landmarks. Keep rural areas together.

“We don’t want to send a county in the wrong direction,” Olson said.

The commission plans to hold two public hearings on the proposed map this month — on March 12 and 20 — then will meet again on March 22 to consider the feedback before sending its final proposed map to the governor.

Hogan then would submit the map as emergency legislation before the General Assembly, which would need to act on it before the end of session.

Meanwhile, the 6th District court case also is being reviewed by the U.S. Supreme Court, which in January agreed to hear an appeal of the lower court’s decision brought by Maryland Attorney General Brian E. Frosh (D). Oral arguments are scheduled for March 26.

While a Supreme Court decision could theoretically upturn the process, Olson said it was unlikely the highest court in the land would act anytime soon — meaning his group must continue its work.

“We don’t have a crystal ball,” said retired U.S. district judge Alexander Williams, commission co-chair. “We don’t know exactly what the Supreme Court will do.”