



Maryland House committee recommends legislative redistricting map

The Maryland State Senate met Dec. 6, 2021, to introduce congressional redistricting bills and override vetoes from Gov. Larry Hogan.

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ANNAPOLIS — A House of Delegates committee voted to recommend a congressional redistricting plan proposed by the Legislative Redistricting Advisory Commission, and the Maryland Senate voted to override several vetoes Monday — the first day of the General Assembly’s 2021 special session.

The House’s Rules and Executive Nominations Committee held a joint session with the Senate’s Reapportionment and Redistricting Committee to hear testimony on two congressional redistricting plans — one supported by Democratic leadership in the Maryland Legislature and one supported by Gov. Larry Hogan, a Republican.

The Rules and Executive Nominations Committee voted to recommend the legislative commission’s map; the Senate committee is expected to take up the measure later this week.

Members of the public expressed a range of opinions on congressional redistricting.

Walter Olson, Republican co-chair of the Maryland Citizens Redistricting Commission, supported by Hogan, helped present that commission’s maps.

He touted the commission’s process, which he called “highly responsive to public comment,” as well as the proposed map.

“It offers a highly understandable layout of congressional districts,” Olson, a Frederick County resident, said.

Hogan established the citizen commission earlier this year; it was composed of three Republicans, three Democrats, and three unaffiliated voters.

The citizen commission map was introduced legislatively Monday as SB2 and HB2, and makes significant changes to the existing congressional boundaries. The House panel did not vote on the governor's legislation after Monday's hearing.

Maryland's registered Democrats outnumber registered Republicans about 2-1, but the state has just one Republican member of Congress out of eight representatives.

Ella Ennis testified in favor of the citizen commission map, saying she thought it would give Republicans, independents, and women a better chance.

"I very strongly support HB2. This proposal is a steep departure from the current gerrymandered districts," Ennis said.

Ennis also noted her opposition to the other congressional redistricting plan under consideration by lawmakers, the Legislative Redistricting Advisory Commission's map.

The legislative commission map is filed as SB1 and HB1 for the special session.

Ennis said that plan splits and dilutes the votes of Hispanic and Black voters.

The Maryland General Assembly is controlled by Democrats, who have a supermajority in both chambers. Members of the legislative commission, which included four Democrats and two Republicans, presented in favor of their proposed map.

Karl Aro, who chaired the commission, emphasized the map's focus on communities of interest and noted that the legislative commission received testimony about the connections between Anne Arundel County and the Eastern Shore.

The legislative commission's proposed version of District 1 includes part of Anne Arundel County, but not Annapolis.

Deepa Patel, of Elkton, spoke in favor of including Annapolis in District 1, which represents the Eastern Shore and is currently the state's lone majority Republican district, under U.S. Rep. Andy Harris (R-Cockeysville).

Patel said she likes the legislative commission's proposed version of the Eastern Shore district better than the existing boundaries. The new map would likely make it more competitive for a Democrat to run against Harris.

Patel encouraged keeping districts together in a way that offers "representation to everyone," including minorities like her and her family.

"As a minority in a very uncompetitive district, we have never felt a part of the political process and we've never been represented by our officials."

Del. Eric Luedtke (D-Montgomery) said much of the criticism of the legislative commission's map was based on its treatment of county lines.

"People don't separate their lives based on county lines," Luedtke said. "They cross county lines all the time to go shopping, to go to work, to take their kids to lacrosse or football practice."

Luedtke praised the legislative commission's map for its focus on communities of interest.

Aro responded to questions about the criteria for congressional redistricting, and put emphasis on population and the Voting Rights Act, which regulates the consideration of race in redistricting.

The full Legislature is expected to vote this week to approve a congressional map, which will then go to Hogan for veto or approval.

Earlier in the day, the Senate voted to override a variety of vetoes, including some that had passed overwhelmingly during the 2021 regular session.

The Senate took time to discuss three veto overrides, covering local tax rates and brackets, parole rules for those sentenced to life in prison and collective bargaining for employees of community colleges.

In discussion of SB133, which would change rules for local income tax levels and tax brackets, Sen. Bryan Simonaire (R-Anne Arundel) opposed the override.

“One thing we haven’t talked about is, ‘Why would the local counties need to raise taxes?’” Simonaire said. “It’s because this body passed millions and billions of dollars of unfunded mandates over the years.”

The bill’s proponents argued the bill would create tax relief for working families.

The veto was overridden in the Senate with 30 votes to 17.

Many Republicans also opposed overriding the veto on SB202, a bill to shorten the time period before a person sentenced to life in prison is eligible for parole, and remove the governor from the parole process in these cases.

Sen. Jill Carter (D-Baltimore) supported the bill as part of “long overdue” criminal justice reform.

“Maryland incarcerates the highest percentage of Black men in this country and holds them for longer sentences,” Carter said.

Sen. Robert Cassilly (R-Harford) sought to uncouple the bill from race and connect it to violent crime.

“At some point the victims of crime have to have a voice in this body,” Cassilly said.

Other Republicans took issue with the amount of time those convicted of first degree murder would be incarcerated before the possibility of parole, as well as the number of parole commission members required for parole votes.

The Senate voted to override Hogan’s veto of SB202, 31 to 16.

Monday’s final override vote in the Senate was on SB 746, a bill regarding collective bargaining rights for community college employees.

Sen. Justin Ready (R-Carroll) spoke against the bill, saying it would raise costs at community colleges.

“All this bill really is doing is going to add the cost to education,” Ready said. “And it’s going to have to be passed down to the very people who we want to try to keep education affordable for.”

Sen. Benjamin Kramer (D-Montgomery) disagreed.

“There was no direct correlation whatsoever between tuition increases and the collective bargaining afforded those community colleges,” Kramer said.

Kramer said studies have shown some community colleges with collective bargaining actually had lower tuition.

The Senate voted to override the veto on SB 746, 32-15.

Overrides on two other bills, SB 420 and SB 97, were postponed indefinitely.

SB 420 would have loosened sanctions on drug paraphernalia, while SB 97 was related to marketing for the Purple Line.

Those vetoed bills the Senate voted to override will go to the House of Delegates.

The House moved to save a consent calendar of veto overrides for later in the special session, while others would be held for the next legislative session.

At time of publication the House was in recess and scheduled to reconvene Monday evening; the Senate is expected to reconvene Tuesday morning.