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Maryland Citizens Redistricting Commission Convenes Introductory Meeting

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Members of the Maryland Citizens Redistricting Commission convened a virtual introductory meeting Wednesday night — but the data they’ll need to draw their proposed maps is still months away.

Maryland Secretary of Planning Robert S. McCord reminded members of the nonpartisan, nine-member commission Wednesday that, due to COVID-related Census delays, redistricting data might not be available for some time.

Census officials released their first round of data last week, but block-by-block population data that state officials need to draw districts of equal size will be released by Aug. 16 as an untabulated “legacy format summary file,” according to the Census Bureau.

McCord told commission members that the Maryland Department of planning will need an additional four weeks after that release to adjust the data to comply with Maryland law and have incarcerated individuals reallocated to their last known address.

McCord said officials will then have to wait until Sept. 30 to ensure all the Census data lines up: According to a separate release from the Census Bureau, “most states lack the capacity or resources to tabulate the data from these summary files on their own,” and tabulated data will be available by Sept. 30.

“We will be working furiously to support you,” McCord said, “Because for all intents and purposes, you have a three month window, let’s say October, November and December.”

While commission members will be without the map-drawing data for some time, they still plan to host weekly meetings to get feedback and information from members of the public, experts and state officials. The executive order from Gov. Lawrence J. Hogan Jr. (R) creating the commission requires “regional summits” to collect public feedback, but whether or not those regional-based meetings will be remote is up in the air.

While Hogan has charged with commission with drawing new congressional and legislative district boundaries that he’ll submit to the General Assembly for consideration, lawmakers are expected to redraw and approve final maps.

Co-Chair Walter Olson (R), a senior fellow at the Cato Institute’s Robert A. Levy Center for Constitutional Studies, said the commission hopes to eventually hold in-person regional meetings, but initial meetings will likely remain virtual.

“We probably will still be in a phase of doing Zoom hearings for a while, but we don’t want that to keep us from doing hearings with a regional emphasis,” Olson said.

Commission members will hash out more details about how to conduct public hearings at future meetings. The commission’s next meeting will be next Wednesday at 7 p.m.