

LARAMIE BOOMERANG

Redistricting still an issue at state, local levels

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Wyoming's election district boundaries may have been approved months ago by the Wyoming Legislature, but that doesn't mean redistricting is no longer a topic of conversation.

During a meeting of the Legislature's Corporations, Elections and Political Subdivisions committee last week, the committee — which created the initial redistricting plan considered by the Legislature earlier this year — agreed to learn more about a proposal from Rep. Marshall Burt, L-Green River, and Andy Craig of Libertarian think tank The Cato Institute.

The proposal, according to Craig, would draw House district boundaries on actual county lines, rather than arbitrary boundaries set by the Legislature every 10 years. Craig argued that, in addition to being simpler than the current redistricting process, this method is also more closely aligned with Wyoming's Constitution.

“There is another way to do it, and the Wyoming Constitution actually envisions this, which is you use whole counties as units of representation in the House,” Craig said. “...It's a slightly different idea, but it's one rooted in Wyoming's history and geography.”

The state previously had a county-based system that ended after the 1990 census, Craig said. The primary argument against the county-based system at the time was districts were malapportioned and some counties received more representation than they deserved.

This problem could easily be solved by combining smaller-population counties into one district while maintaining the boundary lines of those counties, Craig said.

“You might have, for example, the three Big Horn valley counties all together in a district, and they would each get a representative,” Craig said.

Sen. Cale Case, R-Lander, said he was interested to learn more about Craig’s plan at the next corporations committee meeting in August, but he had his doubts about the feasibility of the proposal.

“I think it’s going to be harder to do than you think and harder to maintain deviation,” Case said. “Not every county is going to fit the set number of representatives, and not every county that has less (representation) will have a county next to it that can make up the difference. I think it sounds good in theory. It really does. But...it doesn’t seem feasible to me.”

Every 10 years, the Legislature must undergo a redistricting process to ensure voting districts match population shifts as measured by the U.S. Census, and lawmakers are tasked with ensuring each district is substantially equal to any other, at a plus or minus 5% deviation in size.

However, this isn’t as easy as it sounds.

In order to meet deviation in each district, voting district boundary lines rarely conform with county, city and geographical boundary lines. For example, an in-deviation plan considered by

the Legislature this spring would have moved the Sheridan County communities of Arvada and Clearmont into Campbell County's House District 52 in order to keep districts in deviation.

That plan was strongly opposed by Sheridan County's legislative delegation, and the final redistricting plan kept Arvada and Clearmont in Sheridan County, but also put all the county's House and Senate districts out of deviation, which means Sheridan County residents are underrepresented in comparison to other counties and communities in the state.

This underrepresentation has caused concern for some, including Sheridan County Democrats Vice Chair David Myers, who said the party has discussed the possibility of litigation against the state.

Ultimately the party has decided to defer litigation while the state works on a legislator-led solution. Myers said he was interested to learn more about Craig's plan and how it could positively impact the state moving forward, but litigation is still on the table if the corporations committee ultimately fails to address the underrepresentation problem in Sheridan County, he said.

"It's hard to get people motivated or interested in redistricting until they see in their everyday lives what underrepresentation means for them," Myers said. "As long as the lines are drawn the way they are, the people of Sheridan County do not have one vote, they have a fraction of a vote. So our vote literally matters less than a vote in Campbell County or Natrona County. That's a problem, and I hope the corporations committee takes it seriously."

Speaking during the corporations committee meeting, Case said he understood Sheridan County Democrats' frustration with how redistricting turned out, and said he "wished them well" if they ultimately turned to litigation to rectify the issue.

“I would certainly be in sympathy with their thoughts,” Case said of the Sheridan County Democrats. “...Certainly, in the end, it wasn’t this committee’s plan (that was approved) and several members of this committee didn’t vote for it. I believed we should have a plan in deviation, I still do and I wish them well in their lawsuit.”

The corporations committee next meets Aug. 25-26 in Saratoga.