



Redistricting Reform Commission Continues To Take Public Comment

Kevin McManus
September 22, 2015

Members of the Maryland Redistricting Reform Commission have been traveling around the state, seeking public comment on the current process of drawing legislative and Congressional districts. They're scheduled to be at Hagerstown Community College on Monday, September 21st beginning at 1:00 PM.

Co-Chair Walter Olson of New Market says the panel is looking at establishing an independent commission to draw up the legislative and Congressional district lines. "About a half-dozen states already have independent, non-partisan commissions in which the elected officials no longer get to draw lines for themselves," he says.

Maryland's current system allows elected leaders to determine district lines, but it has problems, according to Olson. "It's makes districts uncompetitive which were once competitive," he says. "It gives the people drawing the lines, which means elected officials, a chance to punish their enemies."

Using an independent commission to determine legislative and Congressional district lines has been popular in other states, especially in the west, according to Olson, who notes the idea is making its way east.

Olson also says letting elected officials draw the legislative and Congressional districts discourages citizen participation in politics. "You wind up getting a lot more voter apathy because your vote doesn't matter as much as the district has been carved up so as not to be competitive. And if you're not sure of which district you're in, you're less likely to pay attention to politics in the first place," he says.

But even with an independent, non-partisan commission drawing the legislative and Congressional districts, Olson acknowledges there's always going to be some people who won't be happy. "There's not going to be any system that satisfies everyone. There's not going to be any system that's wholly free from people bringing agendas, perhaps even to help their party. But what you do is improve your chances of getting something halfway decent," he says.

The idea of reforming the process of drawing election districts has been discussed since

Maryland's Congressional districts were redrawn after the 2010 Census. Parts of Montgomery County were added to the 6th District, and the 8th District was extended into Carroll County.

Republicans said the mostly Democratic leadership in Annapolis was going after some GOP office holders. They noted that the result was long time Republican Congressman Roscoe Bartlett's being defeated for re-election in 2012 by Democrat John Delaney. But Olson notes that it happens in states where Republicans are the majority party. "If you look around the country at the other worst gerrymanders, like North Carolina and Texas, often it's been Republicans who are responsible there," he says.

Olson says if you can't make the Commission's hearings, you can go its website and leave a comment.

The Redistricting Reform Commission is expected to release a report with recommendations by November 3rd.