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Jefferson School Board members clash over redistricting

Published: Sunday, August 19, 2012, 6:15 AM



By **Mark Waller, The Times-Picayune**

Jefferson Parish School Board members are advancing divergent plans to redraw their electoral districts in response to **the most recent census results**. One approach seeks minimal change, evening out the population by moving one Harvey precinct to a different board district. The other option calls for significant change, carving parts of three districts to create a new majority black district on the West Bank.



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Jefferson Parish School Board members Etta Licciardi, left, and Cedric Floyd have proposed two very different redistricting proposals.

The parish currently has one majority black School Board district, which includes southern parts of Kenner and sections of the West Bank from Waggaman to Marrero. Cedric Floyd, the lone African-American on the board, represents that district and also works professionally as a demographer with expertise in redistricting issues.

Floyd argued at a School Board executive committee meeting last week that the black population in Jefferson Parish has increased enough as a percentage of the whole to justify creating a second minority-majority district. A 2011 census estimate said 27 percent of the parish's residents are African-

American.

Floyd unveiled a plan that converts a Gretna-based district represented by board member Mark Morgan into a majority black district by redrawing lines with the neighboring areas served by members Etta Licciardi and Ray St. Pierre. The board is structured to have nine districts, regardless of what shape they take.

"It is ripe that a second black majority district can easily be created," Floyd said, adding the school system faces legal challenges if it doesn't address the issue. "We could stay ourselves out of trouble if in fact we are sensitive to the numbers."

Morgan, who would see the biggest changes under Floyd's plan, agreed that legal attacks will follow if the

board isn't thoughtful about redrawing district lines, but he argued for a less disruptive approach. Citing his experience with similar issues as city attorney in Gretna, Morgan said the system should carefully research options by hiring a demographer independent of any board members to present an alternative and then hold public hearings before making a decision. Officials said they have until the end of the year to adjust districts based on the last comprehensive census in 2010.

Regarding Floyd's plan, Morgan urged consideration of constituents who supported and voted for him and other members only to see their representation potentially switch. He argued neighborhood continuity should factor into the decision.

"Obviously I'm most affected," Morgan said. "If there needs to be a majority black district, there needs to be a majority black district. But this cuts out half the people who voted for me."

At the same time, Morgan said, he can't support a minimal plan. "You're going to get sued, guaranteed," with that approach, he said. "The success in a lawsuit depends critically on what you do from this point forward," Morgan said. When it reviews the plans, he said, the federal Justice Department will weigh the effort invested in the decision. In the event of a loss, he said, "It gets extremely expensive."

The less invasive plan came from Licciardi, who said she was inclined to propose a change because her district, stretching from Harvey to Lafitte, is a key growth corridor in Jefferson Parish and now has a disproportionately large population.

Divided evenly out of a total 2010 Jefferson Parish population of 432,552, board districts each should have about 48,061 residents. Licciardi reported her district has 51,752, putting it about 7.7 percent above the baseline. Federal regulators, she said, call for 5 percent deviation or less.

Her suggestion is to trim a precinct that runs along the Harvey Canal from her district and fuse it to Morgan's, switching a group of more than 2,000 residents.

Licciardi also balked at Floyd's plan. "I'm looking at a district that's 50 percent different from the district I walked and knocked doors on," she told other board members.

Even though the number of schools in a board district lacks any official standing in population-based redistricting, Licciardi said, she also argued that should be weighed as a practical matter.

Wrapping up its discussion, the board's executive committee, which includes four members, deadlocked on three attempts to make a recommendation to the full board. All nine board members attended the committee meeting, but just the four could vote.

Morgan proposed hiring a demographer to create another choice for the board. "If you don't do that, we will be sued and it's going to cost us hundreds of thousands of dollars," Morgan said.

Committee member Larry Dale concurred. He said he wanted to avoid litigation and referred to recent legal losses the board has suffered in fights with the Jefferson Federation of Teachers over teacher layoffs and employee furloughs.

But members Mark Jacobs and Mike Delesdernier voted against Morgan, stalemating the vote at 2-2. Jacobs suggested adopting one of the plans and hiring a demographer later if federal officials reject it. He argued it seems likely the system will get sued no matter how it proceeds.

He proposed offering the Floyd and Licciardi plans for a public hearing at the next full board meeting on thursday and then deciding between the two. The vote was 2-2, this time with Dale and Morgan voting against it.

Morgan then proposed hiring a specific demographer he knows, Glenn Keopp. That failed 2-2, along the same lines.

Finally, Morgan instead chose individually to introduce a proposal to hire Keopp for the full board to consider at the Thursday meeting. And Jacobs introduced a competing motion to advance the Floyd and Licciardi plans for further consideration.

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