

Population could lead to new South Jersey seat

By: Audrey Harvin Burlington County Times



From the Associated Press:

As officials prepare to start using new population counts to create new state election districts, the possibility exists that they could move a whole legislative district from the northern part of the state to the southern region.

That is one possibility open to lawmakers involved in the process to redraw the state's legislative political map.

Under a potential strategy to balance out population shifts, Republican and Democratic negotiators may talk about moving a district from the northeast corner of the state to a spot in the central-southern stretch in Ocean or Burlington counties.

Five Democrats and five Republicans are preparing for the task known as redistricting, which is completed once a decade based on U.S. Census Bureau data. Officials draw the boundary lines between legislative election districts to ensure each area represents about the same number of people.

To do that, the 10-member Legislative Apportionment Commission must reach a compromise on a district map within a month of the data coming out. Each party tries to draw boundaries to create as many districts as possible with residents who are likely to vote for them.

During the past 20 years, the party that won the redistricting battle went on to capture control of the Legislature — the Republicans in 1990, the Democrats in 2010.

Typically, an 11th member is appointed to the deadlocked commission to act as a tiebreaker and cast the deciding vote between competing maps.

The map has to be ready in time for campaigning to November, when every seat in the Legislature is up for election.

Predicted population shifts have made a new district in the southern region a possibility. The 2010 Census counts of population at local and even neighborhood levels are expected to be released in New Jersey late this week.

Recent population estimates indicate massive loss in Essex and Hudson counties and explosive growth in Ocean, Gloucester and other southern counties.

As population has shifted from north to south, lawmakers must create a district map that reflects that.

Assemblyman Jay Webber, R-Morris Plains, who leads Republicans on the New Jersey Legislative Apportionment Commission, acknowledged Friday the possibility of moving a district from the top of the map farther down.

"Districts have in the past been uprooted from one part of the state to another," he said.

"However, I stress that we are not prejudging official numbers, which have not arrived yet. It's far too early to be talking about specific scenarios. We have not drawn any maps."

State Democratic lawmakers, who succeeded 16 years ago in controlling the redistricting process, downplayed talk of massive changes to

the legislative map.

"The current map is not a travesty," said Sen. Jeff Van Drew, D-Cape May-Cumberland, Atlantic. "Obviously, we want to adjust population and the changing nature of the communities. But not huge changes."

But as a possibility, the idea of removing one of the districts from Essex-Hudson counties and making room for it further down the state sounded plausible to some political observers.

"I think the suggested changes, with northern counties losing a district and somewhere in the area of Ocean or Burlington gaining one, isn't that surprising, given the demographic shift you're seeing," said Brigid Harris, a political science professor at Montclair State University.