

HOUSE SPECIAL COMMITTEE ON REDISTRICTING

Cheshire County Community Input Session

October 12, 2021

Meeting Minutes

Members of the Committee Present: Rep. Steven Smith, Rep. Paul Bergeron, Rep. Marjorie Smith, Rep. Connie Lane, Rep. Lucy Webber, Rep. Matt Wilhelm, Rep. Bob Lynn

Senator James Gray, Senator Donna Soucy

Opening Summary

Representative Steven Smith opened the meeting of the House Special Committee on Redistricting. This session is being video and audio recorded. Senator Gray opened the Senate Special Committee on Redistricting.

Representative Smith explained that while they are in this facility neither the Courts of NH or the County Commissioners of Cheshire County have anything to do with this Public Input Session or the redistricting process as it is underway in the General Court. The purpose of these meetings is to receive local knowledge and input about redistricting in Cheshire County.

Senator Gray introduced himself, and recognized Senator Kahn who is the Senator for Cheshire County. Senator Soucy introduced herself. The House members introduced themselves. Senator Gray added that Senate hearings do not allow clapping or booing as it is inappropriate. He stated that testimony given should be listened to with respect.

Testimony

Spec Bowers – Grantham - He would like to correct statements that have been repeated in previous meetings and among the general public. He believes that the following statements are not true: “the NH Constitution requires that towns that are large enough to have their own representative seat be allotted its own district seat.”; “New London is constitutionally guaranteed its own district and representative.”; “Canaan is legally entitled to its own representative district.”; “In 2011, 152 towns were eligible, but 62 of those towns did not receive their own House District, violating the Constitution as amended.” Mr. Bowers stated that the key phrase in the NH Constitution is “reasonable deviation” and that a town is not entitled to its own district just by being large; it’s population must be within a reasonable deviation. New London and Canaan’s population deviation are beyond

what is considered reasonable. He estimated that in 2011, only 30 towns were within reasonable deviations. The Keene wards deviate 34% from ideal population and are not entitled to their own districts. He urged the committee to not attempt to give every large town its own district and then fix unreasonable deviations by producing ugly floterial districts which defeat the intent to have locally elected representatives. He asked the committees to eliminate those huge floterial districts from the current map and create small districts that meet the intent of the Constitution.

Jeff Dioklar - Rindge – This past year in Rindge they passed a warrant article that asked for free and fair elections and no gerrymandering. They are of a size that he believes they deserve their own representative district. They have a school district with Jaffrey that is not in their town, and they do not have commonality with them. Where they do have commonality, they should share representatives. For the Senate and Executive Council Districts, they are grouped in with Nashua, with whom they have nothing in common. They are rural and Nashua is urban. They do not have any medical services in Rindge. Residents have to drive about 30 minutes to get healthcare. They need a representative that understands their rural needs and not just the needs of an urban area.

Senator Jay Kahn – He noted that it is a pleasure to welcome the Committee to Cheshire county. He is in his third term in the State Senate and has been in the region for 33 years. They are a County of 76,000 people according to the latest census and each Senate District will have between 55,000 to 65,000 people. It would make sense that Cheshire County would be in two separate Senate Districts but that is not the case. Currently, he represents fifteen of the twenty-three towns and the remaining eight are peeled off into three other Senate Districts. The consequence of that is very little influence coming from the eight towns. He would recommend that they divide Cheshire County into two separate Senate Districts. He mentioned that the school districts that are represented in Cheshire County are the Keene School District, the Monadnock School District, Hinsdale, Winchester, Fall Mountain Regional School District, Conval School District, and Jaffrey Rindge School District. He suggested that those seven school districts are a body of interest that could be worked with when trying to define two Senate Districts. Sullivan and Cheshire County together have a large population that represents western NH and have a lot in common. He would ask that the committee find more geographic commonality than Executive Council District 2 currently has. There are a lot of complications in splitting up 400 representative seats across the state. There will be very diverse districts but there is a need for some public feedback after the House District draft maps have been drawn and he hopes that they will be able to incorporate more informed commentary at that time.

Ian Burke – Keene He is working with the Open Democracy tech team on the map-a-thon project. He believes representation works best when the representatives can easily connect with their constituents and when they can share common interests. Redistricting for party and electoral advantage marginalizes actual communities and favors national party affiliation and creates a less effective legislature. He hopes that in future redistricting cycles NH can move towards an independent redistricting process and for this process the committees can put communities together with shared interests' above political advantage.

Representative Smith opened the meeting back up at 6:40 p.m. He explained that information on the redistricting process for the House of Representatives can be found on the general court website. On the page for the Special Committee on Redistricting they will find a link that will enable them to email all committee members as well as a link for meeting minutes and recordings. He commented that these sessions are being held in all ten Counties. Local insight will be taken and applied to maps and in November the committees will vote on the draft maps but the process will continue through the new year.

Senator Gray mentioned that the Senate has a web site as well with links to email the committee, upload testimony or access the recordings and minutes. He reminded the public that the drawn maps will be Bills going through the normal hearing process which will give them time to comment again.

Rep. Cathy Harvey – Chesterfield She represents the towns of Chesterfield, Walpole, Hinsdale and Westmoreland. Her district is rural and they share the Connecticut River. It is important to keep them together in one district. In her 6 years as a representative, she has not had any constituents complain about how Cheshire District 1 is put together. It works for them because a lot of their projects affect all of the towns. The Hinsdale bridge, the nursing home, and broadband expansion are just a few examples. Her constituents can travel from one end of the district to the other very easily. She has heard people say that some districts have problems and need to be fixed; Cheshire District 1 is not one of them.

Rep. Paul Birch – Westmoreland – He agrees with the first speaker of the evening regarding the reasonable deviation. The Supreme Court ruled after the last redistricting that there is a hierarchy of values to apply. The top value is the federal, one person, one vote. The NH values include that towns should get, within a reasonable deviation, representation by size, not dividing towns into multiple districts, and paying attention to common geography. He agrees that things work well in Cheshire 1. He believes this is due to commonality of interests which is not in the constitution but is important to all citizens of New Hampshire. Putting the four river towns together made the most sense in the last redistricting due to the

ecology and economics of the Connecticut river. Whether it is commerce and the river, waste and the river, or transportation and the river, it is a big deal to those that live on the river.

Meeting Adjourned 6:51