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POLITICS AND PEOPLE

Retired American Press editor Jim Beam has covered politics and people for more than 40 years.

He is the author of *Positively Beaming* a hardbound collection of favorite columns.



Political survival top priority

Posted January 23, 2011 at 7:03 am

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The redrawing of election lines after every federal census can become a cutthroat experience. Some citizens in Calcasieu will remember when the parish was carved up in 1991.

Legislators have called themselves into special session March 20 to April 13 to tackle the reapportionment issue again. And a review of the process might help.

Reapportionment is the official term for redrawing election district lines, but it is also called redistricting, remapping and reshuffling. State legislators are charged with doing it every 10 years after the federal census, and many of them are primarily interested in their own political survival.

Others whose districts will be redrawn by the Legislature serve in Congress or on the Louisiana Public Service Commission, the state Board of Elementary and Secondary Education, the state Supreme Court and possibly some courts of appeal.

We can use the Legislature to explain how the process works. There are 105 House members and 39 state senators. Louisiana's 2010 population is 4,533,372.

Divide that population by 105, and each House member is supposed to represent 43,175 residents. Senators would each represent 116,240 people. The rules say all districts must be within 5 percent above or below those numbers.

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The Joint Senate and House Governmental Affairs Committee will tour the state seeking citizen input on the reapportionment process. It will bring along a map with district lines that contain the 2010 population figures.

The committee will be at the Lake Charles Civic Center on Feb. 22. Citizens will tell its members how they would like to see their voting districts drawn to satisfy the new numbers. Legislators will then have their opportunity at the special session to give their input.

Districts in danger of being wiped out or changed drastically are those that have lost substantial population or those represented by term-limited legislators or others who haven't held their seats long.

In the case of Calcasieu Parish in 1991, it was carved into five state senatorial districts after the death of Sen. Jack Doland of Lake Charles. Senators trying to save their own hides reached into Calcasieu to get the population count they needed for political survival.

The result was one senator representing 67.4 percent of Calcasieu and four others representing 14.9, 7.1, 5.8 and 4.8 percent. DeQuincy, Vinton, Westlake and Sulphur were each represented by a different senator.

Tim Stine of Sulphur, a state representative at the time, said, "Jack Doland's body has not yet even turned to dust — and his Senate colleagues are already treating him like dirt."

Major changes to a House or Senate district always have a ripple effect. And one favorite tactic is for longtime legislators to reach into other areas for population.

New Orleans lawmakers, for example, have reached into neighboring Jefferson Parish for population numbers in order to survive the next election.

Former state Sen. Armand Brinkhaus, D-Sunset, was the man behind the butchering of Calcasieu Parish in 1991. He refused to let his senatorial district become a majority-black district in the Lafayette area, and reached out elsewhere for population numbers.

Brinkhaus chose the southeast corner of Calcasieu Parish to get the numbers he wanted. Other senators representing Calcasieu were former Sens. Jim Cox of Lake Charles, Bryan Poston of Hornbeck, John Saunders of Ville Platte and the late Cecil Picard of Maurice.

Defenders of that plan said Calcasieu was better off with five senators instead of two. However, the small fraction of people that most of them represented diluted this parish's effectiveness in the Legislature.

Things didn't improve until 1997, when the Legislature approved a bill to redraw 19 state senatorial districts. Legislation was drafted in response to a lawsuit against certain majority-minority districts.

The redrawn districts left Calcasieu with three senators, and one of those three represented all of Jeff Davis Parish.

The change was made possible through the cooperation of then-Sens. Jerry Theunissen of Jennings, Tommy Casanova of Crowley and Don Hines of Bunkie.

After the 2001 reapportionment, Sen. Willie Mount of Lake Charles represented primarily the Lake Charles, Moss Bluff, Westlake and Sulphur areas. Theunissen represented all of Jeff Davis Parish, a large section of southern Calcasieu Parish and parts of Acadia Parish.

Process complicated

The redrawing of election lines can be as confusing to legislators as it is to voters they represent. One public official I quoted in 2001 explained why.

"I'm glad this comes up every 10 years," he said. "It takes nine years to tell where our voters are."

The same thing can be said for voters. Ask them to name their state senators and representatives, and the odds are many of them will tell you they aren't sure.

Legislators could improve the situation if they drew election districts that are more compact. Unfortunately, the first order of business for many of them is to enhance their own re-election chances.

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Political life will be much easier for the folks back home if legislators make the reapportionment process as simple as possible.

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