

Wants, needs clash in remap

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In describing the special session to redraw the districts from which officials are elected, Louisiana House Speaker Jim Tucker parodied a song from the Rolling Stones' 1969 "Let it Bleed" album.

"You can't always get what you want. And if you try sometime, you find you get what you need," Tucker said.

A lot of political wants will come into conflict with legal needs as Louisiana legislators re-



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draw election district lines to reflect population shifts since the 2000 U.S. census, the Terrytown Republican said. The special session began Sunday and will continue through April 13.

But a couple of federal laws trump the politics. One requires equalization of population in legislative, congressional and other election districts to meet "one man, one vote" standards. The other protects the voting rights of minority populations.

Louisiana is being watched by federal officials to ensure compliance with civil rights law. The U.S. Justice Department must approve any plan because of Louisiana's history of discriminatory election practices.

Tucker and Senate President Joel Chaisson II, D-Destrehan, agree that the task ahead will be challenging on the legislative front because of population losses in Orleans Parish as well as downturns in other parishes. Orleans alone lost 130,000 people in the past decade. Ascension, Livingston, East Baton Rouge and St. Tammany parishes had big gains.

"Never before have legislators been faced with population shifts of this magnitude," said Chaisson.

"It's the impact on New Orleans that's tough," said Tucker. "And then that impact on the rest of the state."

Federal law requires that state House and state Senate remap plans come within 5 percent over or under an ideal population — so districts will grow or shrink geographically and areas gain or lose legislative power.

Some incumbent lawmakers will be thrown into the same districts and will have to run against each other.

New Orleans is guaranteed to lose minority legislative election districts because the population is not there to justify status quo.

Those minority districts must be redrawn elsewhere in the state so black voter strength is not weakened. And that affects how the districts are drawn throughout the state.

There's not a lot of discretion in the House remap process because of the federal Voting Rights Act and population movement — it is what it is, said Louisiana House Democratic delegation chairman Rep. John Bel Edwards, D-Amite.

"It looks like it is primarily going to be driven by what's required under the Voting Rights Act," Edwards said.

Section 2 of the landmark Voting Rights Act of 1965 applies nationwide and protects minority voters from practices that deprive them of an equal opportunity to elect a candidate of choice. The law aims to protect those in the populations who make up the majority of voters from diluting the voting strength of voters from minority populations.

Louisiana must also comply with the Voting Rights Act's Section 5, which applies to states, cities and counties that have histories of discrimination against minority voters. The state must get pre-approval by the U.S. Justice Department of any election law changes it makes.

Justice Department lawyers will be assessing legislative, congressional and other election district plans to determine if they discriminate against minority voters or have "retrogressive" effects — leaving minorities worse off than under current law.

Hanging over lawmakers' heads is that ultimate need — winning Justice Department approval in time for fall legislative elections.

"The key is trying to — as they say in golf — 'hit the sweet spot' that will get you the best result," said Louisiana House redistricting leader state Rep. Rick Gallot, D-Ruston.

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