

Panel adds minority district

Committee bucks

House speaker

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BATON ROUGE — The House committee looking at redrawing the state's 105 House districts sided with its chairman over House Speaker Jim Tucker, R-Algiers, and voted 10-9 Wednesday to create a 30th minority district for the chamber.

The Committee on House and Governmental Affairs narrowly approved the amendment offered by Rep. Rick Gallot, D-Shreveport, to Tucker's House Bill 1.

The committee meets today to consider more amendments, including those that would realign districts in the New Orleans area.

Gallot and Tucker said if the entire amended bill is passed by the committee today, it will be debated Sunday night by the entire House.

Two Republicans and an independent sided with Gallot in voting to create the new minority district. By taking voters from three other districts in the Shreveport area, Reps. Alan Seabaugh, R-Shreveport, and Richard Burford, R-Stonewall, could be pitted against each other in the same district.

The district is now represented

by Seabaugh, who was sworn in this week to fill out the rest of the term of Republican Rep. Wayne Waddell, who resigned.

Tucker's plan created two new majority African-American districts in the original version of his bill, bringing the total to 29. Gallot's change in the Shreveport area would bring the total to 30.

Tucker said after the meeting that he may leave the amendment on his bill. "This was a coin toss today," Tucker said. "This is the kind of decision the committee should make."

Tucker said the creation of a fourth minority district in the Shreveport area would lower minority voting strength in at least one of the other African-American majority districts, making it more difficult for a black candidate to get elected.

Voting for Gallot's amendment: Reps. Taylor Barras, D-New Iberia; Jared Brossett, D-New Orleans; Greg Cromer, R-Slidell; Mike Danahay, D-Sulphur; Herbert Dixon, D-Alexandria; Brett Geymann, R-Lake Charles; Girod Jackson III, D-Marrero; Rosalind Jones, D-Monroe; Dee Richard, I-Thibodaux; and Gallot.

Voting against: Reps. Patrick Connick, R-Harvey; Cameron Henry, R-Jefferson; Nancy Landry, R-Lafayette; Tony Ligi, R-Metairie; Nick Lorusso, R-New Orleans; Erich Ponti, R-Baton Rouge; Steve Pugh, R-Ponchatoula; M.J. "Mert" Smiley R-St. Amant; and Jane Smith,

R-Bossier City.

Shortly after the vote, the Republican Legislative Delegation met and arguments could be heard emanating from the room. "It was contentious," said one member, who asked not to be named.

Rep. Barbara Norton, D-Shreveport, whose district is 88 percent African-American, said that creating the new minority district would reduce her minority population to about 68 percent.

Rep. Roy Burrell, D-Shreveport, who favored the creation of the new district, said his area is losing minority voters also, from about 74 percent to 66.6 percent.

"I don't know how we determine a safe district" for a minority to run and win, Burrell said. "Nothing guarantees a minority representation," Burrell said.

House Clerk Alfred "Butch" Speer, who has been through the redistricting process, said past experiences indicate that the U.S. Justice Department wants as many minority districts created as possible to protect minority voting rights.

"Our failure (to create as many minority districts as feasible) to do that could lead us to not being" approved by the Justice Department, Gallot said.

In the past, Speer said, plans have been rejected because minorities were under-represented in drawing of House districts.

"All we can do is give you our opinion based on past

experiences," Speer told the committee.

"This is not only the right thing to do, but it is required," said Rep. John Bel Edwards, D-Amite, chairman of the Legislative Democratic Caucus.

Rep. Jane Smith, R-Bossier City, who chairs the GOP Caucus, said the tumult in the Republican caucus after the vote came from members who were upset about how the new plan might have a ripple effect on nearby districts and possible incumbent matchups this fall.

Earlier Wednesday, the panel approved minor changes to precincts in three rural parishes in the Baton Rouge area that the lawmakers involved agreed to.

The committee also rejected a proposed change by Reps. Rosalind Jones, D-Monroe, and Kay Katz, R-Monroe, to give their city of Monroe three House seats instead of two. The plan would have pitted Reps. Sam Little, R-Bastrop, and Bubba Chaney, R-Rayville, who represent rural areas near Monroe, in the same district. Little and Chaney asked the committee to reject it.

Jones and Katz produced another plan to keep the two men in their own districts but bring Little closer to the Monroe city limits, while still creating a third Monroe-based district. Little also opposed that plan, saying it took away key precincts in rural Morehouse Parish.

Both amendments were rejected 14-5.