

Panel approves addition to bill



Advocate staff photo by ARTHUR D. LAUCK

State Reps. Herbert Dixon, D-Alexandria, from left; Roy Burrell, D-Shreveport; Patrick Connick, R-Marrero, seated; and John Schroder, R-Covington, look over proposed changes Wednesday to House Bill 1 redrawing the 105 districts of the Louisiana House.

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30th black majority district added

BY MARSHA SHULER
Capitol news bureau

By a slim margin, a Louisiana House panel voted Wednesday to add a 30th black majority district to a plan that would reshape the chamber's 105 election districts.

House redistricting experts as well as Legislative Black Caucus and Democratic delegation leaders argued that to do otherwise would jeopardize U.S. Justice Department approval of the plan and invite a costly legal challenge.

The majority-Republican House and Governmental Affairs Committee voted 10 to 9 to add a minority district in Shreveport and thereby change House Speaker Jim Tucker's remap plan, which outlined 29 dis-

tricts in which minority residents made up the majority of the district. As a result, two Republican lawmakers from Caddo Parish are in the same election district.

Two Republicans and a lawmaker with no party affiliation joined Democratic lawmakers in voting for the amendment. Tucker opposed it.

The panel postponed final action on House Bill 1 until Thursday with other proposed changes pending consideration.

Tucker declined to say whether he would seek a revote. He met with Republican lawmakers behind closed doors after the meeting.

"This is a coin toss. I just happen to disagree," said Tucker, R-Terrytown.

As Tucker's bill hit the committee, it contained 29 minority districts — two more than what exists today.

One of the new minority districts would be in Baton Rouge.

Redistricting committee Chairman Rick Gallot, D-Ruston, said that a "cohesive, compact and contiguous" new majority-minority district can be created in Shreveport and if one can be created it is required under the federal Voting Rights Act of 1965.

The act protects minority voters from policies that deprive them of an effective vote in election of candidates of their choice.

Gallot said he did not relish going

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against Tucker in advocating the change. But, the House redistricting leader said, "I believe this is my obligation. If you approve this amendment you are complying with the law."

A draft plan that Tucker originally circulated included the Shreveport district.

Tucker said he came to the conclusion that a fourth Shreveport minority district was not the way to go after an analysis of the percentage of black to white voter turnout in 2007 elections. So, he stripped it from HB1 before it was filed.

"The proposed amendment will almost ensure in normal turnout elections that a non-minority could be elected to the seat," said Tucker.

And, he said, it could end up that two out of the four minority districts are represented by non-minorities because of the black voter dispersement among the four districts.

The districts may be majority black but the difference in voter turnout percentages could lead to black candidates not winning elections, Tucker said.

Tucker said he preferred to keep the three Shreveport minority districts, one of which is 88 percent black population.

Gallot countered that the goal is not to ensure a minority is elected but "to provide a minor-

ity an opportunity. It's not to guarantee an outcome."

He said other House districts today have a black majority but are represented by white lawmakers.

House redistricting expert Bill Blair testified that he analyzed the vote in the four proposed minority districts based on the 2008 presidential election and the 2010 Shreveport mayor's race.

"The turnout is high enough that these are effective districts," said Blair.

Under questioning, Louisiana House Clerk Butch Speer said the U.S. Justice Department has the authority to consider opportunities to create new black districts as well as the authority to reject plans that don't take that into account.

"If there's an opportunity to elect an African-American, the failure of this body to endorse a plan that provides that opportunity will very likely be viewed by the department as a discriminatory purpose," said Speer.

There is a line of court cases and U.S. Justice Department actions to prove it, Speer said.

State Rep. Alan Seabaugh, R-Shreveport, said that the fourth minority district would dilute "non-minority voting power."

"There is no requirement to maximize minority representation," said Seabaugh, one of two Republicans that would be thrown into the same majority white House district.

House Democratic delegation chairman state Rep. John Bel Edwards, of Amite, said political party advantage and protecting incumbents are irrelevant with the Justice Department.

Voting for the 30th minority House district (10): Chairman Gallot, and state 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, D-Harvey, Rosalind Jones, D-Monroe, and Dee Richard, No Party-Thibodaux.

Voting against a 30th district (9): Reps. Patrick Connick, R-Marrero, Cameron Henry, R-New Orleans, Nancy Landry, R-Lafayette, Anthony Ligi, R-Metairie, Nick Lorusso, R-New Orleans, Erich Ponti, R-Baton Rouge, Stephen Pugh, R-Ponchatoula, Mert Smiley, R-St. Amant, and Jane Smith, R-Bossier City.