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Caucus seeking more black seats in Legislature, possible second minority congressional seat

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BATON ROUGE — Members of the Louisiana Legislative Black Caucus say they want to expand the number of majority black seats in the Legislature and Congress but it will be careful not to weaken existing districts.

At an all-day event Thursday at the Southern University Law Center, state and national figures involved in drawing election districts discussed laws affecting redistricting and how the U.S. Department of Justice must approve any changes made in the state's current plan. Louisiana is one of 10 states governed by the Voting Rights Act because of past discriminatory voting laws and actions.

"We definitely want the number of minority districts to go up," said state Rep. Patricia

Smith, D-Baton Rouge, the LLBC chair. “We’re not sure how many” can be justified by Census numbers, “but I’m positive one more in Baton Rouge, possibly more.”

Plans also are floating around that would create a second minority congressional district when lawmakers meet March 20 in a special session to draw lines that comply with new U.S. Census population numbers.

Currently, the 2nd District, represented by Congressman Cedric Richmond of New Orleans, is the only congressional district in which black voters outnumber whites. Some lawmakers say adding a minority congressional district would be difficult while at the same time eliminating one congressman due to lack of population growth.

“Folks are not going to apportion themselves out of power, so I think it is good that the Justice Department reviews” the Legislature’s decisions, said former state senator and congressman Cleo Fields of Baton Rouge. Fields formerly chaired the Senate committee that draws election lines.

He also was elected to Congress in a district drawn at that time which was known as “the Zorro District,” because of the way it zig-zagged through the state to pick up enough black voters to make a second minority majority. The district was dissolved after a legal challenge and new lines were drawn to satisfy the court.

“The biggest challenge in congressional and legislative redistricting,” Fields said, is “you’ve got friends you’ve been working with for 10 years and you’ve got to eliminate their districts.”

Fields cautioned that just because there's a majority of minority voters in a district doesn't mean a minority would win, but "I've always frowned on 'packing'" — making a district overwhelmingly black or white. "I've always been for giving blacks an opportunity to compete. But my view is not necessarily the majority view."

The current state House of Representatives illustrates Fields' concern that just having a district that shows more blacks in it doesn't guarantee a victory for a black candidate.

House records show that six whites and one Hispanic were elected to the House from predominantly black districts that were adopted in 2004 — District 21 Rep. Andy Anders, D-Vidalia; District 72 Rep. John Bel Edwards, D-Amite; District 91 Rep. Walt Leger III, D-New Orleans; District 95 Rep. Walker Hines, D-New Orleans; District 98 Rep. Neil Abramson, D-New Orleans, District 102 Rep. Jeff Arnold, D-New Orleans, and District 93 Rep. Helena Moreno, D-New Orleans.

In the Senate, two predominantly minority districts elected white lawmakers. Dale Ho of the NAACP Legal Defense Fund said: "If there is a lot of racial polarization and turmoil, you need 55 percent to be certain" that a minority can be elected. "If white voters in a district are willing to elect minorities, you might not need 55 percent."

"In Louisiana, you have to have at least 55 percent," Fields said. "You can go to sleep on that."

"At some level, it's the black people's problem," said attorney James Gray. "In Louisiana, folks are not voting."

Butch Speer, clerk of the House, said that

under new Census numbers 23 districts have majority black populations. "But if we draw 23, we would not get preclearance" from the Justice Department. "We have to draw more than 23."