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House panel's chief plans remap of La.'s high court districts

But efforts could run into opposition

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BATON ROUGE -- The chairman of the House redistricting committee said Friday he is "75 to 80 percent sure" he will have a bill ready to go at the upcoming special session to redraw the state's seven Supreme Court districts whether the court submits its own plan or not.

Rep. Rick Gallot, D-Grambling, chairman of the House Committee on House and Governmental Affairs, said although the agenda for the session calls for redistricting the state's highest court and five circuit courts of appeal, the major attempts will focus on the Supreme Court and the Gretna-based 5th Circuit Court of Appeal.

Gallot said that the seven-member Supreme Court has had its present districts unchanged since 1997 based on the 1990 Census. According to the 2010 census, the districts range in size from 438,291 people in the Orleans-Jefferson District 7 to 791,281 in the Baton Rouge-anchored 5th District.

He said although the courts are not subject to the laws that require districts to be as close in population size as possible, "there are some pretty wild population differences."

Gallot said he also will have a bill to fix the boundaries of a segment of the 5th Circuit Court of Appeal, which a lawsuit claims dilutes minority voting strength and lessens a minority's chance of getting elected to the court. The seven-judge court has jurisdiction in a four-parish area: Jefferson, St. John the Baptist, St. Charles and St. James.

The lawsuit is pending in federal court on the alleged minority voter dilution but the judge has given the Legislature the chance to address the issue first.

Although House members seem willing to grapple with redrawing judicial boundaries, some key senators do not.

Sen. Bob Kostelka, R-Monroe, a retired judge and chairman of the Senate Committee on Senate and Governmental Affairs, said a few weeks ago that the court boundaries will not be redrawn "if I can help it." He said there will not be enough time in the session, which opens March 20 and must end by 6 p.m. April 13, to redraw the political boundaries of the courts.

The special session must also deal with drawing new political lines for legislative districts, congressional districts, the state Public Service Commission and the Board of Elementary and Secondary Education.

Senate President Joel Chaisson II, D-Destrehan, said that he would like to see a plan on redrawing

the high court's districts drafted by the seven justices as a starting point but time is drawing close for a plan to be submitted.

"I have not seen a plan, but they have been invited to submit" one, Chaisson said.

Supreme Court spokeswoman Valerie Willard said the court is "looking into a plan but nothing is definitive or final." Willard said Chief Justice Kitty Kimball has indicated that "she would like things to remain" as they are now. Willard said the high court will not be submitting plans for the five appellate courts. She said that the circuit courts of appeal will submit their own plans.

Fifth Circuit Court of Appeal Judge Marion Edwards, who heads the appellate judges association, could not be reached for comment.

Gallot, a lawyer, said even if he proceeds with his own high court redistricting bill, "I would not propose something they (the justices) have not had an opportunity to provide input on."

House Speaker Jim Tucker, R-Algiers, said he would like to see lawmakers address redrawing the 5th Circuit districts and the seven Supreme Court districts, but if redistricting all of the appellate courts "doesn't happen, it is not the end of the world."

Only legislative and state education board seats are up for election this fall.