



Legislature makes history with session

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BATON ROUGE — For the first time in state history, the Legislature is calling itself into session.

The issue will be redrawing the election lines for the House and Senate, congressional districts, the Board of Elementary and Secondary Education, the Public Service Commission, the Supreme Court and state appellate courts to follow population shifts indicated by the 2010 census. The session is to run from March 20 through April 13.

Although a constitutional amendment approved in 1954 granted the Legislature such authority, it has never exercised the option. Special sessions have always been called by governors.

State Rep. Rick Gallot, D-Ruston, told the Baton Rouge Press Club on Monday that he and others involved in drawing new election lines decided "it's the job of the Legislature" to handle redistricting, so it should set the parameters for handling the job. "It's appropriate because it is a legislative action."

A petition is being circulated among House and Senate members for signatures on a document officially calling the session.

Although only a majority of signatures is needed, legislative leaders are seeking unanimous agreement. The House has completed the process, Clerk Butch Speer said, and the Senate is expected to get its final signatures today. About 20 of the 39 senators — a majority — had signed by Monday afternoon.

Gallot said it will be a new experience for most lawmakers. Because of turnovers, some prompted by term limits, only 12 of the 144 members of the Legislature dealt with redistricting 10 years ago. Gallot, the chairman, and Rep. Jane Smith, R-Bossier City, are the only ones out of 19 members of the House and Governmental Affairs Committee to have dealt with it in 2000.

Even though they decided to exercise their legislative authority, leaders asked Gov. Bobby Jindal if it was all right with him.

Jindal said later Monday that he concurred with their decision but "I made it clear I would be more than happy to call them into session."

He said he can see that it's "a very personal issue" and could be "very intense" recarving election districts for their colleagues but "unless they're talking about annexing Texas and Mississippi, it doesn't affect my race."

Gallot said that this is not the only thing that's being done differently in redrawing districts. The House and Senate Governmental Affairs committees will tour the state soliciting input from the public on how districts should be shaped.

"The worst thing I could do is go into the hearings with a preconceived notion," he said, so no proposed district maps will be presented at the hearings, as they have been in past years' hearings.

Drawing new election lines to accommodate population shifts could lead to existing legislators being forced into running against each other. A drop in state population will force Louisiana to lose one of its current seven congressional districts, so a competitive situation is certain for two congressmen.

Gallot said he expects to get input from the existing congressmen, since at least two will be cast in the same district, and Jindal said he asked the congressional delegation to develop a plan that they can agree on.

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