

Redistricting feedback sought

Public invited to weigh in on efforts to redraw Albany's political map

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ALBANY — Residents will get their first chance to weigh in Tuesday night on what the city's political map should look like for next year's Common Council elections — and the next decade.

The city's eight-member redistricting commission, which is charged with redrawing the lines of the council's 15 wards according to 2010 Census data, will host a public input meeting from 5:30 to 8 p.m. at the main library on Washington Avenue.

Tuesday's meeting marks the public's first official opportunity to talk to the commission, which has already held a half-dozen public work sessions for the complex and potentially controversial task.

"We want to know what they think," said the commission's chairman, Vicente Alfonso, who is the lone member who was appointed by the Common Council at the recommendation of Mayor Jerry Jennings.

The council blocked Jennings' other pick, civil rights activist Aaron Mair, because he no longer lives in the city.

Vice Chairman Josh Oppenheimer said input from residents about how they define their own neighborhoods and other community ties is essential to producing a political map that fairly reflects them.

"That's going to inform our process as we draw the lines," he said.

While the commission is soliciting public input on many facets about how it will eventually draw the new map, one topic apparently not on the table: the reduction in the size of the Common Council, even though some lawmakers themselves championed a reduction.

When a series of spring 2011 council hearings failed to find consensus among lawmakers on whether the body should shrink to nine or seven, or some other number — a change that would ultimately require voters' approval — lawmakers set the matter aside and suggested the question be addressed during redistricting.

At 15 members, the council is the largest in the state outside New York City — too large, some argue, for a city of just 97,856 people.

But Alfonso was firm that the city charter simply does not grant the commission the authority to make those cuts.

"By the city charter we are not empowered — nor can we — eliminate wards. That is not what we're charged with," Alfonso said. "There is a lot of misinformation out there that we have to address."

Council President Pro Tempore Richard Conti, who offered one of two competing plans to reduce

the council's size, said that nothing would prevent the commission from making a recommendation on the matter, though the short timeline before next November's elections would likely make any changes by then impossible.

For those races, candidates would ordinarily start circulating ballot petitions that specify the ward in which they're running in June, meaning the new lines would have to be adopted by then. But there's also lingering talk that the state Legislature could move the primary day up three months from September to June, pushing petitioning much earlier.

The idea of shrinking the size of the Common Council also encountered sharp resistance last year from some quarters of the city's minority community, which voiced fears it would dilute its representation. Currently, four of the council's 15 members are black.

Ensuring minority communities are fairly represented is among one of the core missions of redistricting — and frequently one of the most controversial. For the third time in the last three Census counts, Albany County is embroiled in federal litigation with those who allege its 2011 redistricting plan did not comply with the Voting Rights Act, which seeks to ensure that cohesive communities have a fair shot to elect candidates of their choosing.

The city's commission will hold a second public meeting on Sept. 12, also at the main public library, followed by three public hearings. The commission aims to finalize its plan by the end of November. The Common Council will then hold its own public hearing and decide whether to adopt the commission's recommendations, modify them or create its own plan.

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Have a say

In addition to the two public meetings on Tuesday and Sept. 12, the city of Albany's Reapportionment Commission will also hold three public hearings:

6 p.m. to 8 p.m. Oct. 23, Albany High School

6 p.m. to 8 p.m. Oct. 30, Albany Public Library Arbor Hill/West Hill branch

6 p.m. to 8 p.m. Nov. 13, Albany Public Library Delaware Avenue branch

The commission meets for working sessions and takes public comment most Tuesdays in the mayor's conference room at City Hall. The commission can be reached at reapportionment@ci.albany.ny.us. For more information, contact the city clerk's office at 434-5090 or visit the city's website at www.albanyny.gov