

Public Input Valuable When Redrawing Montana's Legislative Districts

by Jim Regnier, Linda Vaughey, Joe Lamson, Pat Smith, and Jon Bennion

It's time to redraw the lines of Montana's state legislative districts, and your help is crucial.

Every 10 years after the federal census is complete, our state constitution requires a bipartisan commission of five citizens to redraw legislative districts. Each state legislator should represent approximately the same number of people, so population changes in our state in the last 10 years mean lines must be redrawn to accommodate those shifts. The Montana Districting and Apportionment Commission was appointed in 2009 to accomplish this task.

During spring and summer of 2012, the Commission will travel around the state to hold public hearings to gather your feedback on draft maps. Maps will be available to view before we hold the hearings.

Before those maps are drawn, though, the Commission needs to hear from you. Districts need to have approximately the same number of people in them, but they should also reflect the makeup of your community. In early 2010, the Commission adopted redistricting criteria to guide us in the process of considering and adopting new maps. One of our criteria states that we "will consider keeping communities of interest intact. Communities of interest can be based on Indian reservations, urban interests, suburban interests, rural interests, neighborhoods, trade areas, geographic location, communication and transportation networks, media markets, social, cultural, and economic interests, or occupations and lifestyles."

And that's where we need your help; we hope you'll tell us about your community. What defines the community? What are its boundaries? And what makes it distinct from or similar to other communities near you?

The Commission is bound by the U.S. and Montana Constitutions when redrawing political districts. Our mandatory redistricting criteria reflect these laws by focusing on population equality, creating compact and contiguous districts, protecting minority voting rights and complying with the Voting Rights Act of 1965, and ensuring that race isn't the predominant reason a district is drawn.

Also, the Commission set out three discretionary criteria based on traditional redistricting principles to guide our work: following the lines of political units (think counties, cities, reservations), following geographic boundaries (think rivers, mountains, roads), and keeping communities of interests intact.

So keep these factors in mind when providing input on redistricting and be sure to include in your comments how your ideas fit with the criteria.

To send your comments, e-mail us at redistricting@mt.gov. To find out more about redistricting and the Commission, visit www.leg.mt.gov/redistricting.

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