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Senate Redistricting Plan Should Be Rejected

By Lieutenant Governor Bill Bolling

The General Assembly will reconvene today to begin a Special Session on redistricting. Over the next few days, the Senate and House of Delegates will adopt plans to redraw Virginia's congressional and legislative district boundaries.

The redistricting process is never an easy one. It is an "every man for himself" atmosphere as legislators seek to protect their districts and political careers. The process almost always devolves into blatant political gerrymandering, as the majority party seeks to obtain an advantage in future elections.

The current process of drawing legislative and congressional district boundaries is broken and needs to be replaced. That's why I have supported a bipartisan redistricting process where legislative districts are based on a sincere effort to achieve objective criteria such as compactness, contiguousness and common interest.

In my role as Lieutenant Governor, I also serve as President of the Senate of Virginia. Because of this, I am more directly involved in the activities of the Senate and I tend to more closely monitor issues pending before the Senate. That has been the case with the pending issue of redistricting.

Last week, Senate Democrats, who currently hold a majority in the Senate, unveiled their plan for redrawing Virginia's 40 State Senate districts. While I expected the Democrats plan to be based on political self preservation, they exceeded my wildest expectations. Their plan may be the most blatant example of political gerrymandering in recent Virginia political history.

The plan introduced by Senate Democrats is an illogical and indefensible proposal that is designed to protect incumbent Democrats, weaken marginal Republican districts, place incumbent Republican Senators in the same district whenever possible, and draw new Senate districts in Northern Virginia that give Democrats the best possible opportunity of winning these seats.

The Democrats plan violates every acceptable principle of redistricting. Their plan unnecessarily and inappropriately divides political subdivisions and results in districts that are impossible to comprehend. For example, the Democrats plan divides 34 counties, 10 cities and 18 towns, and it includes three districts that are contiguous only by water.

I realize that political gerrymandering has long been a part of the redistricting process, but that doesn't make it right. Even legally permissible gerrymandering can be carried to such an extreme that it offends the sensibilities and abuses the public trust.

That is exactly what the plan proposed by Senate Democrats does. They have completely discarded the best interests of citizens and replaced it with a blatant attempt to achieve the greatest possible partisan political advantage.

I have no doubt that the Democrat majority in the Senate of Virginia will pass their redistricting plan without regard to legitimate objections that will be raised by Republican Senators. However, once this plan is approved by the General Assembly it must also be reviewed by the Governor and that's where the real battle will begin.

Later this week, an Independent Bipartisan Redistricting Commission that was appointed by Governor McDonnell in January will issue its recommendations for redrawing Virginia's congressional and legislative district boundaries.

Governor McDonnell appointed this Commission in the hope of producing redistricting alternatives that are based on objective criteria of compactness, contiguousness and common interest, rather than raw political advantage.

I look forward to receiving and reviewing the Commission's recommendations. It is hard to imagine a scenario in which the Commission's recommendations would not be preferable to those advanced by Senate Democrats.

Ultimately, Governor McDonnell will have an opportunity to offer amendments to the redistricting plans that are adopted by the General Assembly or veto these plans. I look forward to working with the Governor to ensure that legislative districts are drawn with the best interests of citizens in mind.



Lieutenant Governor Bill Bolling