

DEIRDRE MACNAB and LYDIA GALTON: Guest commentary ... Legislature must stop stalling on redistricting maps

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You probably have better things to do this hot Florida summer than watch the redistricting meetings as they unfold one after the other across the state. However, for those of us who are watching, it is jarring to listen as one Florida voter after another stands up and says the same thing over and over: “Show us the maps”; “Follow the Fair Districts rules voters put in the state Constitution”; and “Stop wasting our money fighting the rules we passed.”

Why is redistricting so important? For years Florida has had some of the least competitive elections in the country, stemming from scores of “races” with no challengers. Why? Because for years politicians picked their voters instead of voters picking their officials. And the good news for voters is the passage of Amendments 5 and 6 with 63 percent of the vote this past November will end gerrymandering and restore a much higher degree of competition and accountability.

Regrettably, our legislative leaders are playing the role of the spoiler. Predictably, as incumbents, they are determined to protect their seats to the end, through delays and litigation.

Never mind their continuous protestations that they intend to follow the will of the voters, as they continue to spend taxpayer money to fight the amendments’ passage in court. Never mind that they issue false statements at these hearings protesting that they are only trying to “clarify” the language, when legal documents state clearly their intention to overturn.

The most important concern that you, the citizen, should have is the timeline. This is a maneuver that sets us up for chaos and confusion in our 2012 elections, as the Legislature sticks to a timeline designed only to protect incumbents. How? Simply by using these 26 public meetings (with no maps presented) they have created a delaying tactic that will result in a schedule likely to prevent candidates from even knowing what districts they might run in — until after the deadline date for filing is over. Who does that help? Incumbents, naturally.

Very simply: the current timeline for redistricting set by the Legislature is unfair to Florida voters.

Guess who else has noticed? Our supervisors of elections, that's who. At every meeting, the local supervisors of elections have expressed concern with the Legislature's proposed timeline and recommended speeding up the timeline to help ensure more efficient and fair elections.

Supervisors are rightly concerned. The current timeline makes it highly unlikely that districts will be finally approved before candidates must sign up to run for election. In addition, it is unlikely that district and precinct adjustments will be finalized by the deadline for sending absentee and overseas ballots to our military. Districts may not be finalized until August 2012, which would mean Florida's maps would be approved later than almost every other state in the nation.

Other states that have public hearings allow citizens the opportunity to comment on actual proposed maps. For example, after maps are finalized in Arizona, they are made available to the public for comment for 30 days before final passage. In Florida, Redistricting Committee Chair Will Weatherford has said citizens will have only a two- or three-day comment period before any votes are taken on a proposal.

Have legislators drawn maps yet? Why not? They've had the census data for more than four months! If they have drawn maps, why are they not showing them to us? When will they show them to us? What are they waiting for?

The League of Women Voters calls on the Legislature to prepare the maps earlier, debate them in the fall, give the public time to review and to comment, and pass them the first week of session. This will leave more adequate time for preclearance by the Justice Department and any possible litigation which often occurs following redistricting.

Florida voters: We must keep our eye on this schedule as it will determine whether new candidates will have time to file to run, and most importantly for us the voters to have time to adequately get to know our candidates and make informed good choices. As the Legislature's own attorney noted, their current timeline will likely make for chaos and confusion in the 2012 election. Florida voters deserve better.

For more information about Florida redistricting, visit www.TheFloridaVoter.org.



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