

Beacon Hill Byline - By Mary Rogeness

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Redistricting: Making 'Gerry' Proud

This is a difficult year for Congressional hopefuls in Massachusetts. Just when they were getting their campaigns in gear, the Supreme Court reduced our state delegation from 11 to 10 members. The districts that were designed in February disappeared overnight as both incumbents and challengers waited for the Legislature to draw new district lines.

That action came last week. After much speculation and rumor about where the boundaries would lie, Longmeadow will remain in the Second Congressional District. Just as we were getting accustomed to membership in the First District and beginning to establish ties with John Olver's office, the news came from the State House that we are in the Second.

The saga of congressional redistricting which occupied the Legislature in Boston for much of this year was completed last week when Gov. Weld signed his approval of the new map. That map serves the Springfield area well and is a reasonable compromise among the many different interests that had to be served. These are some of the factors the Legislature considered.

Minority representation -- Boston has a substantial minority population that is presently represented by several congressmen.

Merrimack Valley District Gov. Weld is committed to a single district 10 represent the interests of this region of the state. The new Fifth District fills that requirement.

Party Politics - Redistricting has been referred to as the ultimate political activity. The Democratically controlled Legislature wished to protect all incumbent officeholders, and the Republican governor would not accept a plan unless it provided some opportunity for his party. His veto threat provided the impetus for negotiation between the parties.

One Person one vote - A court ruling has mandated that all districts be exactly the same size, requiring that some towns and even some precincts be split. Each district contains either 601,643 or 601,642 voters.

There has been a lot of talk about "good" and "bad" redistricting plans, and either adjective can be applied to any configuration depending on the point of view of the speaker. Massachusetts has long been known for creative cartography, giving birth to the word gerrymander after a 19th century redistricting plan. Holding to that tradition, the new map does have some unusual boundaries.

The Supreme Court has endorsed creation of districts with at least 40 percent minority population to increase minority representation in Washington. The new map gives Boston a district with 38 percent minority votes.

A portrait of Gov. Elbridge Gerry looks down from the State House walls at the legislators who have developed and adopted the new congressional map. I recently heard the venerable Massachusetts statesman William Saltonstall comment on how that first master of the gerrymander would view the efforts of today's legislators. "Gerry would say," he remarked, "You are doing to good job, but I did it better!"