

Beacon Hill Byline by Mary Rogeness

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Time to Re-Draw the Congressional Districts

The action as old as our nation is influenced by the factor as basic as human self-interest: drawing new Congressional district lines. It is a task that was completed at the State House last week. It is my belief that the legislature paid too much heed to existing Congressional boundaries, and in doing so missed an opportunity to improve the structure of our districts.

The Constitution mandates that the nation's census be taken every ten years and, after the count, that each state reapportion its Congressional districts. The census is now complete. Massachusetts retained our ten members of Congress, and the Massachusetts legislature had the task of adjusting the old district lines to equalize the population of each district.

Congressional redistricting can be seen as a rare opportunity to equalize the voice of every voter. The Supreme Court has required that equality by mandating "one person, one vote." Since our state has not changed its number of Congressmen, that equalization can be delivered most simply by shifting a few of the towns from one district to another. Such changes do not recognize communities of interest that might have changed over past decades, but the legislature accepted that simple approach after rejecting attempts to develop more innovative plans.

Every member of our Congressional delegation has an understandable interest in retaining the constituency he currently represents. He has spent at least five years developing a relationship with that set of voters.

A competing interest of the legislature is to provide representation from each region of the state. Uneven population growth throughout Massachusetts has diminished the voice of the southeastern part of the state. One quarter of the state's population now lives south of Greater Boston, and not one member of Congress lives there. Newton, Boston and Quincy provide their voice.

The redistricting committee last summer produced a plan that created a new southeastern district. The plan was announced at a time Congressman Marty Meehan was expected to leave office to run for governor, and it was discarded when he stated his intent to seek re-election.

With all ten Congressmen seeking re-election, it becomes significantly more challenging to change district lines. Republican legislators met that challenge and presented such a plan for debate. It was supported by all Republican members and by several others but failed to carry the day.

The Republican alternative preserved the districts of nine Congressmen. It even kept much of the district of the tenth, the Cape Cod district, though it would have required Congressman Delahunt to move his residence. That district is so strangely drawn that its representative lives in Quincy, abutting Boston, while representing the Cape, Nantucket and Martha's Vineyard.

Our town remains in the Second District, represented by Congressman Neal, whatever happens to the rest of the state. And the entire state will continue to be well represented in Washington D.C.

Why should we be surprised that Massachusetts missed the once-in-ten-years opportunity to make a difference for the million and a half of our neighbors.

Drawing district lines is a legislative task as old as the nation, and convoluted district lines are almost as old. Their common name derives from an early Massachusetts governor, Elbridge Gerry. When someone described a legislative district as looking like a salamander, the rejoinder was that instead it was a "Gerrymander."