

Redistricting

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week to stop Fagan from drawing her own maps.

Fagan wants the Legislature to draw districts using alternative data to the U.S. Census. The Oregon Constitution doesn't explicitly demand redistricting be done with the census numbers.

But it always has used the census, lawmakers say. Doing things differently than how it's been done for more than a century would be a surefire way to tangle with federal courts wanting to ensure Oregon was following civil rights and voting rights laws.

While the court sifts through the paperwork, the Legislature is planning/hoping/praying the Oregon Supreme Court will pick its solution. A way to move things along in advance would be to hold the 10 required hearings — two in each of the current five congressional districts.

Which brings things back to COVID-19. The usual "road trip" of lawmakers to districts to hear from voters aren't happening this year because of COVID-19. All 10 redistricting hearings will be virtual.

Wednesday's hearing was Congressional District 2, a nearly 70,000-square-mile expanse that share borders with California, Nevada, Idaho and Washington. Anyone living east of the Cascades, plus a chunk of the southwest part of the state, lives in the 2nd District.

All four of the other congressional districts are represented by Democrats. The 2nd is solidly Republican, with freshman U.S. Rep. Cliff Bentz, R-Ontario, in the seat.

The hearing Wednesday would require something of a technical miracle. Video testimony expected from Wallowa County, Bend, Medford, Klamath Falls and several other spots in the district taxed the Legislature's internet capabilities. Balking phone lines, echoing microphones, stuck mute buttons and more led to frequent silent spots. Many of the people who signed up to testify either couldn't get through or gave up prior to their turn in the queue.

Two who signed up discovered they lived in other congressional districts.

One caller wanted to know why Wallowa County had been left off a map of Greater Idaho.

Some of the panel members squinted "what?"

Rep. Daniel Bonham, R-Dallas, finally piped up to explain the caller's query was about a theoretical secession of much of Eastern Oregon to form "Greater Idaho" with the neighboring state to the east.

Bonham even helpfully added that maps circulating for

the mythical "Greater Idaho" state did not include Wallowa County, though he wasn't sure why. With the mystery aside, the discussion could return to Oregon.

For over an hour, the committee heard three main themes: The district was much too large. It included different communities with different identities, and in the case of Malheur County, a completely different time zone (Rocky Mountain Time).

Finally, the desires of people in the district were too often ignored in the capitals of Washington and Salem. How they were ignored depended on each testimonial.

In a written statement, Umatilla County Commissioner George Murdock struck a note between hope and resignation over the likely outcome of the process.

"My greatest concern is that our district could be gerrymandered in order to further diminish representation for a portion of Oregon that reflects ideology, values, and interests much different than the remainder of Oregon," Murdock said.

New districts should "geographically make sense" to retain an Eastern Oregon voice in Washington and Salem.

"If Oregon gets a new seat, we are not naive enough to expect more representation for Eastern Oregon but we would like to retain what we have," Murdock said.

Nathan Soltz, chairman of the Democratic Party of Oregon's 2nd Congressional District Committee, said the sparse population and vast landscape made it difficult for communities to feel any mutual connection.

"You can drive from Medford to Enterprise — about 10 hours — and never leave CD2," he said.

Ann Snyder of Ashwood in Jefferson County agreed that the current boundaries created an oversized area with too many acres and not enough people.

"District 2 is geographically too big for one person to accurately represent," Snyder said in written testimony. "Trying to cover an area from Medford to Hood River and the Cascades to the Idaho border is too much, and the people are too diverse."

Brad Bennington of Jackson County said lawmakers needed to listen more to rural voters.

"There is more to the state than just Portland and Salem," he said. "There are a lot of people who feel they haven't been heard."

Bennington said he would give the legislators the "benefit of the doubt" in drawing political maps.

"Democrats can keep themselves in the supermajority until the day the sun doesn't come up," he said.

But Barbara Klein of Ashland said she experienced the opposite feeling. She wanted congressional and state districts that would have more in common with the arts town at the foot of the Siskiyou Mountains.

"Don't separate us from Bend, Deschutes County," she said. "Communities that have shared values, a bit more left leaning."

Todd Nash of Enterprise said it would be difficult to draw political maps with so little population to pool into a district.

"We have about 320 acres per person," he said.

Craig Martell of Baker City said proximity and highway connections should guide the grouping of communities in districts.

"Baker City and La Grande, only 44 miles apart on Interstate 84, belong in the same district," he wrote. "As lines are currently drawn, Senate District 30 is a grotesque gerrymandered monstrosity."

Mimi Alkire of Deschutes County represented the League of Women Voters, which supports the creation of an independent redistricting committee to draw the lines instead of lawmakers.

"Redistricting has been used to restrict and dilute voters," she said. "Voters should choose their representatives, not have representatives choosing their voters."

Resolutions have been introduced in the Legislature to move to a commission like those already used in California and several other states. Several speakers endorsed such a plan. But even if approved by the House and Senate, the change to the state constitution would need voter approval. Any change wouldn't occur until the 2031 redistricting.

Joanne Mina, volunteer coordinator for the Latino Community Association, based in Bend, said it was important for lawmakers to make sure that the census numbers were a complete count.

"The Latinx population has grown from a few thousands in the 90s to over 20,000 strong across all of Central Oregon — our region is united by commerce, culture and values," she said. "Central Oregon is not what it used to be, we are more vibrant, enriched and bold because of all the people that make up our community."

At the end of the evening, Salinas, chair of the House committee, said the gathering of so many people from so many places had been time well spent.

"A robust debate," she said.

The video ended. The committee will hold a second hearing on Saturday, March 20, at 1 p.m.



Eagle file photo

Granit County Commissioner Sam Palmer during a March session of County Court.

Lawsuit

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set up to help Black-owned businesses.

Under the terms of the settlement agreement, Great Northern would receive \$45,000, plus up to \$186,000 in fees for its attorneys.

The settlement proposal noted that \$25,000 of the logging company's payout would be for COVID-19-related expenses listed on its grant application, while the additional \$20,000 would be its service award as the lead plaintiff of the class-action lawsuit.

Applications that were submitted on time by business owners who are not Black will be automatically considered for funding through the grant program unless they opt out of the class action settlement, according to the settlement.

Haupt declined to comment Friday, and Palmer did not immediately respond to the Eagle as of Friday. Palmer told the Eagle in December that he was not involved in the lawsuit.

In a Friday press release, the Oregon Cares Fund said, amid mounting legal challenges, the fund offered to deposit with the court the remaining \$8.8 million it had not distributed, after distributing \$49.5 million to nearly 15,600 Black people, their families and their businesses.

If the court approves the settlement, \$5.3 million of the funds deposited with

the court will be immediately released, and can be dispersed to eligible applicants who have been waiting for grants. The remaining \$3.5 million will continue to be held.

Great Northern — the original plaintiffs in the case — joined with Salem electrical contractor Dynamic Service Fire and Security and sought class-action status for the suit, according to a complaint filed Dec. 6.

The state, per the settlement, agreed to use a different pot of money to pay grants to up to 1,252 non-Black applicants that sought funding through the program before Dec. 8, 2020.

An independent third party will determine how much money those newly eligible will receive.

According to the agreement, the applicants must meet the fund's race-neutral criteria and adequately demonstrate financial loss related to the coronavirus.

According to the settlement agreement, the independent party issuing the funds would apply the same criteria — except for racial self-identification — the Oregon Cares Fund had in awarding claims.

Not all claims will qualify for an award, according to the court document.

By agreeing to the settlement, the court document said, neither side is admitting guilt. The state is settling to avoid "complex, costly and time-consuming litigation and the likelihood of success on the action's merit."

COVID-19

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"Younger groups generally have less to be concerned about," Lindsay said. "But for the older population, particularly residents of the care center, it's their home. They have no other place they can go."

In its press release last week, the care center said the infected residents would require written approval from the Oregon Health Authority before they can be allowed back to the facility.

Although some of the recent cases have been linked to gatherings, Lindsay said they are not the "end all, be all" in terms of what has caused the community spread.

Nonetheless, she said, the jump in infections at the care center and, more broadly, the county highlight the need to be "extremely thoughtful."

She said she could not get into specifics regarding the cause of the spread of the virus. She said Blue Mountain Hospital District management had taken all appropriate precautions with its staff.

She said someone close to her is a resident at a care center elsewhere, and she can empathize with people who want to visit their loved ones at the care center.

On one hand, she said she does not want to spread "fear and paranoia," but on the other, she said she is concerned about the impact of community spread.

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